

Disclaimer: I own nothing. I'm a fan and this is fiction.

Author's Note: This is as AU as it possibly can be. I won't be telling you ahead what happened differently. The story is self-explanatory. Some characters will be exactly the same, others will be different due to different circumstances.

Only so much: Harry Potter is the Boy Who Lived, but nobody knows it. They all think it was Locius Longbottom – Neville's twin brother – who vanquished the Dark Lord. Harry was proclaimed dead when he was two. He isn't, though.

There are tons of similar stories floating around, but I had this wish to write my own.

Important detail: Dumbledore is NOT some manipulative bastard. He's human, he makes mistakes, but that's all.

Have fun reading the story!

Building Bridges

Chapter 1: Green Eyes

Sister Augustine didn't have any favourites.

That was a fact. Everybody knew it. She cared for all of her charges equally.

Sister Augustine was a woman of sixty years and although she was everything but rusty, life started to take its toll: her knees weren't what they used to be; her eyesight had gotten poorer over the years. All in all, she was a little slower than she used to be. And in what she'd recognized to be her calling so long ago, speed was everything.

For nearly thirty-five years Sister Augustine had been the sole warden of a small orphanage on an unobtrusive street in London. Theoretically, twelve children would fit into the old – not pretty, but at least dry – building. In reality, there were twenty, though.

It wasn't only this orphanage that had been asked to take in more protégés, but all of them in the district of London. Sometimes, it was kids coming from the streets, runaways from bad homes, or those who simply had no home to go back to.

Sister Augustine had seen worse times than these: the situation had been particularly bad between the years 1970 and 1981, especially since one orphanage had been destroyed in a terrible fire 1971. Back then, there had been thirty wards under her care and she'd done the best she could. Sister Margret, an elderly lady of seventy and her best friend, had been a godsend back then as much as she was now, although her bones were even older than her own. But that didn't matter: Whether it rained, snowed or there was fog so thick you were unable to recognize your own hands, Sister Margret always came to St Mary's Orphanage in order to cook for however many charges Sister Augustine had under her protection.

Neither of them could tell how long they would be able to keep going, but they'd promised each other to do it as long as their health permitted it.

They had no successor, nobody to follow in their footsteps.

Their Order had run out of young nuns five years ago, which had resulted in the closure of their old convent. Thankfully, the government financially supported St Mary's Orphanage – not well, but good enough to live – otherwise the ladies would have been forced to close their beloved home as well.

However, the lack of adequate successors had forced Sister Augustine to a sad decision last month: she could no longer shelter new children for longer than six months. The charges she'd received until late June were allowed to live here as long as it was possible or necessary, but the others could only find a temporary bed.

The children knew this of course, but it wasn't taken well by the newcomers. Most of them had been pushed around too many times and therefore many conflicts broke out between the residents and temporarily placed children.

Fortunately, her older protégés helped. They played with the little ones when Sister Augustine was occupied, brought them to bed, cleaned them even. They were a community, really, a family, which

was why it had to be particularly hard for the 'Temporaries' as they were called by her children.

Yes, her children. They were hers. She looked after them until they were able to stand on their own feet or they finally found the home each of them so dearly deserved.

There were some like little Johnny who'd been living here for nine of his ten years while others like Marco had only come here two months ago. The fifteen-year-old was thankfully allowed to stay here and would most likely leave when he turned eighteen.

Teenagers rarely found a home.

Many of her children had kept in touch when they'd left St Mary's; some had even adopted some of her charges in later years.

The orphans who lived here might lack real parents and frequently 'lost' friends that were closer than siblings to them, but they had shelter and Sister Augustine, who did all in her power to make their difficult lives a little simpler.

Six months ago, a great scandal had come to light in London's centre resulting in very strict inspections by the government and ever since the elderly nun fought tooth and nail not to lose her responsibilities.

However, food was scarce sometimes and the building lacked in rooms and space. Nevertheless, her charges – especially those who had seen other orphanages or the street's law – were aware of how good they had it here. Therefore they helped her as well as they could to go through the inspections unscathed.

With an almost girlish giggle she remembered how little Johnny, who had been discovered while babysitting little Angelina, had in fact managed to convince the examiner that he was a twenty-year-old apprentice to Sister Augustine suffering from a childhood disease, which inhibited his growth.

They looked out for her as much as she did for them. They always warned her when a new inspector arrived so they could do the necessary changes to go through another test.

Funnily, the idea hadn't come from one of her older charges:

Six of them were fourteen or older; Alexandra would be leaving her house very soon for she'd turned eighteen last month. Seven were between nine and twelve years old whereas the rest (nine) were between one and six.

They all came from different places, but five of them had come to her six months ago and they'd gone through what seemed to have been hell.

You see, six months ago a fire burnt down an orphanage and the ashes had revealed unspeakable terror: the owner of the institute, Michael Sullivan, had forced the children he had sworn to protect to work for their food; he had mistreated them and nobody had known since the orphanage's façade seemed innocent.

Sister Augustine had long ago stopped wondering about the resilience of kids, but when she had taken in five protégés from that place, even she hadn't been able to conceal her amazement:

Yes, Richard – or Char, as they all called him – was very timid for a fourteen-year-old boy and more often than not he was jumpy...

Gregory (Grey) didn't trust men, hated them in fact, which was why she didn't expect him to ever find a home; it was almost impossible for a single mother to gain custody of an orphan...

Lucas (Luke) who was nine and five-year-old Sara both hadn't been able to sleep until she had bent her rules a little bit by allowing them to share a room. In said room, there was another boy and albeit nobody had ever confirmed it to her, she was convinced that said boy was the reason those children were sane, or alive for that matter.

The boy was small and skinny, even for an orphan who hadn't seen enough meals in the course of his life. He had a thin face, black hair and the most remarkable green eyes she'd ever seen.

His name was Harry.

He was a very solemn boy and seemed to be older than his eleven years.

He had been smaller and skinnier when he'd arrived here, all of them had been. Sister Augustine remembered their coming as if it had been yesterday...

She stood outside next to Sister Margret when two police cars arrived. Alexandra raised her eyebrows.

"Hope you know what you got yourself into."

"Alexandra!" Sister Margret reprimanded her with her rough, severe voice, "Those children have done nothing. That Sullivan is the one who committed the crimes, not them."

"As long as you don't think they're innocent." The muttered comment was met with another chastising look from the nuns. Alexandra was a good girl, but she didn't trust anyone at first. She was extraordinarily protective of those she'd come to like; everybody else was a potential enemy.

It was an essential rule for a girl who had spent five years of her life on the streets.

The doors slammed and the police officers told Sister Augustine's new children to leave the car.

First, a young boy, very thin, as if he hadn't eaten enough for several months, with blonde hair and blue eyes practically jumped out of the car, stepping away from the man and glared at him.

He was followed by an older boy, dear God, was he thin! His eyes were fixed on the ground and his shoulders were hunched.

Out of the other car a much smaller boy was revealed. He had brown hair and eyes and Sister Augustine recognized a scar across the boy's left cheek. He waited very close to the car until a small girl (she didn't look older than three years old) left the police vehicle as well. She didn't even look around, but immediately turned her face towards the other child and hid herself from the rest of the world. The boy – she would later find out that his name was Lucas – soothingly spoke to her.

The last of her new charges left the same car the younger ones had been in. It was another boy with black, unruly hair, younger than the

blonde but older than the brown-haired one. He stepped out of the vehicle and laid a hand on Lucas' shoulder.

Sister Augustine had expected the other boy to startle, but he relaxed instead. That was quite remarkable.

"Sister."

It was her turn to flinch, though. She hadn't noticed that one of the police officers had approached her in the meantime.

"My name is Walton. I'm bringing you five of Sullivan's charges. Don't expect them to talk too much for now. The fire must have been frightening and adding that to everything else... Thank God, nobody died. Wouldn't have been too sad had it been Sullivan, though."

That was the most remarkable thing, really. The entire building had burned down; however nobody had been hurt.

It was inexplicable how the man could've left the building since he had been unconscious by the time he was found.

"Thank you, Mr Walton," she answered politely and walked towards the little group.

"Hello, there," she said softly, stopping at what she considered to be a good distance for shy kids. This wasn't her first time, after all.

The blonde one looked at her and smiled weakly. For some reason, he seemed relieved. Then, he looked away.

The raven-black-haired boy took a step forward, hesitantly but decided, and met her gaze.

She almost gasped for she'd never seen such green eyes in her life and when he looked at her, she felt as if he saw much more than just a pair of brown eyes.

A moment later, he took a step back, relaxed visibly and smiled softly. "My name is Harry, Sister."

As if on cue, the other children introduced themselves as well.

Only then she realized that he had judged whether or not to trust her and that his judgment was deeply respected by the children with him. Hadn't he spoken in favour of her, life would have become a lot more complicated.

It had been good, instead.

Harry (his family name he didn't know) was an unusual boy in many ways: He was fiercely protective of those he was close to, not unlike Alexandra, but unlike her, he didn't distrust people in general.

On the contrary, his trust was gained easily (for an orphan for whom self-reliance had become a necessity like breathing), but unlucky were the souls whom he wouldn't put his faith in.

Those he decided to trust, however, were forgiven incredibly easily should they hurt him in any way.

He was earnest, but kind-hearted, and he'd helped her so profoundly she still couldn't quite fathom if she took care of him or the other way around.

He behaved so grown-up at times, she sometimes forgot he was only ten... or eleven. Harry didn't know for sure.

At the age of one or two he had been found in front of an orphanage. Yet, he refused to think he had been abandoned.

'I was loved once. I know that. Something terrible happened. It wasn't their fault.'

Maybe, it was that certainty that had caused Harry's heart to never become bitter.

What had happened in between his second and tenth year of life, Sister Augustine didn't know. She hardly ever did. All she knew was that he'd spent more than one year in Hell.

He never talked about it. None of them did.

It had taken some adjustment when they'd arrived; rarely five children arrived at once.

However, thanks to Peter, a sixteen-year-old boy who had been living at St Mary's for eight years, little Johnny and Harry, who'd played mediators for the rest, they'd settled in nicely.

The black-haired boy had received her other children's respect two days after their arrival when he'd protected Hannah against some of the neighbour's kids ('the Others', as they were called).

She still wondered just what exactly he'd done, but somehow a lot of the harassment by 'the Others' had stopped.

She'd asked Alexandra once, who'd merely answered that he hadn't done anything bad. Coming from a girl who had the physical strength break an attacker's arm, that wasn't particularly helpful.

"Sister Augustine?" The boy who'd just been the main topic of her brooding called her from behind in a low voice. She turned to see him.

"Gaby is sleeping, Madame," he whispered. "I fed her, bathed her and now put her to bed. Is there anything else you want me to do?"

"No, Harry, thank you very much," she replied with a smile.

"I'll be outside with the little ones." At that, he turned around and walked towards the backdoor which led to a small yard, just big enough so her protégés had something to spend their time with.

No, Sister Augustine didn't have any favourites. If she did, it would be the boys with the emerald green eyes, though.

So, that would be the first chapter... Please, tell me what you think.

Read and review!

Chapter 2: Letters From Another World That Is Yet Your Own

It was July thirtieth and the boy with raven-black hair sat in the shadows of a very old tree. It was very warm, but Harry had seen worse. He'd probably be able to weed the garden without suffering a heatstroke, but he liked St Mary's little jungle the way it was.

Unlike most precincts around London, Sister Augustine's garden was allowed to grow as it pleased and was only cut down twice or three times a year. Thanks to that, the most fascinating things could be found. The children were taught which plants were poisonous and none of the younger protégés were allowed to go into the garden unsupervised.

Harry remembered when their care-taker had wanted to explain the "Yard Rules" to them a day after they'd arrived. Boy, had she been surprised when she'd noticed how much they already knew!

He liked Sister Augustine and Sister Margret.

They were both very kind women and he was grateful that they'd taken in so many of them. It was impossible to miss that age started to get to them, which was why he intended to help them as much as he could.

Harry looked up when the backdoor opened.

It was Char, who grinned at him and when he returned the gesture, the older boy walked across the yard and sat down next to him.

"Hey, 'Arry! Whatcha doin'?" he drawled. His voice was rough as if he didn't use it very much, which was ironic. The boy loved to talk, at least when he was among his peers.

"Quit the..." Harry started his standard sentence only to be interrupted.

"Gutter Talk. Gotcha," Char grinned. It was an old game between the two of them. The teenage boy would say something in a strong accent and be chastised for it by the younger child.

They'd met in ... The Place That Won't Be Named... four years ago. They'd arrived simultaneously coming from different places: Harry

was a child of London's centre while Char came from the poorer suburbs. There had been a car accident which had claimed his mother's life. The father had abandoned the two of them when he had been a mere baby. So, left without any relatives, the only alternative had been the orphanage.

A terrible alternative considering the place he'd been brought to.

Harry, well... It was another story. Two orphanages, the streets and yet...

All his life people had been trying to tell him that he was a victim of abandonment and he just knew that wasn't true: green light had taken his family, but he wasn't sure how it was possible.

Additionally, when he focused really hard, he remembered the sight of a firewall and recalled pure exhaustion and unbearable sadness. He wasn't sure whether the situations were connected, but somehow he was convinced that they were.

He hated dwelling upon the past because nobody could give him answers and it didn't help the present.

Harry's life had been hard and the fact his happiest moments must have been from a time he couldn't remember pained him. However life now had been merciful. St Mary's was the best thing happening to him in a long, long time. He'd never had so many good days in a row.

"Earth to Harry? What's up, man?"

"Sorry, Char," he apologized softly. "Just thinking."

"Green light, huh?" Richard's eyes glowed with understanding. The short boy only nodded, his focus was directed on the yard ahead of them. There weren't many people who knew his early memories. However, the fourteen-year-old was one of them. He was one of the few who'd never doubted that Harry had been loved once upon a time, which was one of the reasons why said kid liked him.

They sat in companionable silence when they suddenly heard a loud noise from inside the house followed by an agonized scream. The entrance door was opened before Char could stand up.

It didn't matter how many times Char saw it: Harry was fast! Nobody ever caught him unless, of course (and that happened more often than not), he waited for someone he cared about.

Harry was a strange boy, Richard mused when he quickly walked towards the house: he was so thin and looked so weak and yet the kid could fight frighteningly well which he did only when left with no choice. Even then, his adversaries were stopped, but never hurt.

He'd seen the skinny kid push away teenagers twice his size, really push: sometimes they were shoved across a room and yet... He couldn't put his finger on it... Harry simply hated to hurt people. When he'd once asked him about that, he'd answered:

'Injuring people is easy, but healing them? That's real power. You can rip off a spider's leg, but putting it on? Impossible. "Do no harm", it's a doctor's first rule and the most difficult one.'

Do no harm... It was Harry's first rule as well. And had life not been so cruel, it would only be a matter of time before he'd have ended up as a doctor. He had that unique talent to make people feel better.

Nevertheless, fate was never kind and Harry had winded up in a place where school was nothing but a waste of time if you went at all. He could read and write (albeit the latter he hardly ever practiced and looked therefore a little poor at times) and was well informed on various subjects (even the most unbelievable ones), but he wasn't brilliant.

He was quick-witted and had street smarts. He was also reasonably intelligent, however nobody but the best students among those without any money would ever receive a scholarship, whether to go to university or for the prestigious private schools.

No, Harry wasn't strange because he was excessively bright, not even because he possessed what Richard couldn't help but call a 'healing touch'.

That wasn't it.

The oddest things just kept happening to him: he'd seen that fire engulf Harry, but he hadn't been burned. He'd witnessed him

running through a firewall to claim Sara. Grey swore he'd seen Harry be pushed off a roof who'd just landed on his feet without a scratch! He could practically appear next to you, simply because you hadn't heard him coming.

And the food... Where had he gotten the food? Jean – a kid of sixteen years who'd been in that place as well and had disappeared in the night of the fire – he'd tried to follow the younger boy several times without ever succeeding. Every time, Harry had come back with nourishment.

Some had suspected it was because the boy had lived on the streets nearby London's centre, however the two kids who'd come along with him had said he'd done the same before without ever telling them how he did it.

But that wasn't the weirdest thing, either. It was just... He could have left! Of all kids who'd been brought to Hell, he was the one who – Char was convinced – could have just left without ever being found.

Neither by 'the Coppers' nor by Sulli... him.

Yet, he hadn't. For them.

And for that, Harry (whether he wanted it or not) had his loyalty, to death and beyond.

"Char? Where were you?" He flinched slightly.

That boy! He was like a ghost at times... He'd just come out of the kitchen (probably) and was now standing in front of him. He held a towel wrapped around something.

The kitchen wasn't far off from the closed backdoor, which lead into the yard.

"Sorry, was distracted for a moment. What happened?"

"Tommy slipped. Hurt his arm." Harry looked grim at that.

Of course. Little Tommy, three-years-old, was an accident-prone of the finest.

"Could you fix it?" It was a rhetorical question, really. Harry wouldn't have come back, had the injury been worse.

"Yeah, just a sprain. Some ice and arnica and everything will be fine," he replied lifting his package a little. There was an ice-pack which had been wrapped in by the towel and a small bottle with a label inscribed in Sister Margret's tight, old-fashioned handwriting 'Arnica Montana, 2 tea-spoon in ¼ litre water, date: 3rd March 1991'.

There was a small bed with all kinds of herbs, fruits and vegetables, which had originally been taken care of by the Sisters. However, these days, it was Harry who took great care of it. Nobody entered it without the boy's permission.

The tinctures and ointments Harry was allowed to do as well but only under the ladies' supervision. The labels were written by Sister Margret, though. Not because Harry was unable to write, but he wasn't well-practiced at it.

He could read well enough, but writing just hadn't been important, another reason why the new school they had been attending since they'd come here wouldn't ever believe him capable of getting along in a prestigious high-school.

Therefore, just like him, Harry would attend to Common School after this summer.

Said boy gestured him to follow and together they walked towards the entrance door for that led to the staircase...

St. Mary's Orphanage was a one-story building with a small attic. As already mentioned, there was a rather big yard whose grounds were almost as far as the old house itself. The ground floor contained Sister Augustine's office, her modest little chamber and a bathroom (the latter two were off-limits for the children). Right next to those rooms, towards the backyard, there was what they called the Living Room. It was a mixture of a playground and a library that was mostly used in winter. To the right of the entrance door was the dining room with its direct connection to the kitchen, which (as already mentioned) was very close to the backdoor.

The staircase was in between both rooms, leading towards the children's bedrooms and bathrooms. Theoretically, the right side was the one of the toddlers and the girls while the left side was the boys' side. However, only three of the seven girls were between one and two years old, who were in the Baby's Room. Additionally, Sara had been insisting on being in the same room as Grey, which had lead to a new system: the 'Street Side' (where the entrance door was) had the Toddler's room to the right and Harry's, Sara's and Luke's small chamber to the left. Considerably larger was the room next to them, which was inhabited by little Johnny, Karl (a Temporary), Gregory and Mark. Right next to them was the boy's bathroom. The largest room belonged to the male teenagers, Marco, Peter, Michael ('Kai'), Char and David, though the latter was the other Temporary currently living at St Mary's.

Next to the toddler's room was the girl's bathroom followed by the girl's room with Alexandra, Hannah and Christina. Peter, Gabriel and Christopher, boys between the age of four and six, were residing next to the girls.

All in all, there were twenty-two residents, however two of them were Temporaries.

Currently, Harry and Char visited the toddler's room to help the eldest of the four children.

"Hey, Tommy," Harry spoke quietly, so he wouldn't wake up Gabriela. Angelina and Carla were out under Alex' very strict eye. "How are you, Champ?"

The three-year-old's eyes were still red and swollen, but he didn't seem to be hurting anymore.

Char briefly wondered what the problem had been (it was impossible to have so many sprains without once breaking a bone), before he decided that he really didn't want to know.

"It's okay," the eleven year old boy said soothingly and took a step forward. "I will now put something on your wound, okay? It'll feel a little cold, but that's good. Alright?" Tommy simply nodded and hardly flinched when Harry poured some of the Arnica tincture over the hurt wrist. It was only a little swollen.

Very softly, Harry touched the wrist and rubbed in the household medicine. Then he gave Tommy the icepack and explained: "Put it on your wrist for the next few hours. When you think it isn't cool anymore, go to any of the older kids or me for a new icepack. Don't ever put an icepack on your bare arm!"

Harry added the latter in that warning tone he rarely used outside his first aid duties. When he spoke like that, nobody dared to contradict, although there was still that mellow edge he always carried when his words are meant for the little ones.

He carefully touched little Tommy's shoulder, causing the little boy with red hair to smile. Then, they left the toddler's bedroom.

"Where're you goin'?" Richard asked when they went downstairs.

"Quit the Gutter Talk," Harry replied, but a playful smile adorned his face. "Kertak's waiting."

Ah, Kertak!

The strangest thing about the black-haired boy with emerald green eyes was most likely the eccentric friends he had.

Kertak was very small, a head shorter than little Harry, but he had to suffer from some sort of dwarfism since he behaved maturely. Char had never seen the kid's face for he was always wore a hood when he picked up Harry. But he'd discovered the unnaturally long, thin fingers that looked strong enough to break bones.

He wasn't normal, Richard knew that, but Harry seemed to cherish the kid, in fact, trusted him with his life, which was good enough for Char not to sneak around.

It was none of his business, really.

Kertak and Harry went way back, long before Char met the younger child. Actually, that odd child was one of the reasons why Richard knew undoubtedly that Harry could've left that place, hadn't he decided to stay.

"See you later!" the teenager said for there was nothing else to say. The child always knew when Kertak was waiting for him and he'd

always found a way of meeting him, even under Sull... his watchful eyes. There was no chance in hell Harry wouldn't find a way now.

"Bye, Char," Harry smiled.

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Harry left St Mary's orphanage and the neighbourhood. It was a beautiful, hot day; the sky was blue, only covered by some clouds. When he walked past a dark alley he suddenly stopped and smiled.

"There you are," his smile turned into a grin when he heard exasperated murmur and a hooded, short figure made himself known.

"Kanrukai," Kertak said looking grim, but his serious eyes shimmered with amusement. He'd been trying to sneak up on Harry for nearly five years and he'd never managed to do it. He bowed to fully fulfil the formalities of greeting.

"Rukaikan," Harry replied and bowed in return.

A moment later, official business broke and the friends embraced each other. They hadn't met in over a month, which had only happened once or twice in their five years of acquaintance.

"How are you, saràn?"

'Friend' – It was one of the first words Harry had learnt in Gobbledegock, ironically it belonged to the last humans usually learnt...

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Harry sat down in an unobtrusive, dark corner and watched the ally's colour.

Diagon Alley.

He'd found the magical place six months into his time living on London's streets. He'd left the orphanage at five for it had been unbearable, too crowded, too little money or food. As soon as he'd been old enough to leave, he had.

Harry still didn't quite know what it was about this place where the general laws of nature simply didn't seem to exist. He was drawn to it like a moth to the light and yet... He knew better than to ask, knew better than to talk to adults.

Questions burned within him: why nobody else but him seemed to see the place or why the people here wore such strange cloths or what those weird creatures were that also walked this alley or why those people using these odd sticks were able to defy gravity or why everything here felt so ... right.

He'd never asked and he wasn't planning to.

Tom, the owner of a small pub called The Leaky Cauldron, was very generous. When he'd asked him whether he had some food left from the day, the man had simply handed it to him without asking any questions. He seemed to have instinctively felt that should he be unable to contain his curiosity, he'd never see the boy again, who would be off much worse. That was why apart from a friendly greeting and a comment about the weather, no questions were asked and Harry was grateful for it.

Currently, he was looking at the content of his food bag: bread, fruit, some meat... He sincerely hoped that Tom wasn't naïve enough to believe that Harry wouldn't notice that this was fresh food.

Especially prepared for him.

Harry smiled. It was a nice gesture and although he wasn't very fond of charity, he knew this was probably the only way for his friends to get through winter.

One day, he'd pay him back. He didn't exactly know how, but he would pay him back.

He tensed when he felt eyes watching him and looked up.

"Hello," he said, ready to bail if he was left with no other choice.

"Greetings," a crackly voice replied. Its owner came forward and thereby revealed that he almost certainly came from that large snowy-white building, which towered over the smaller shops.

"Back again, young wand-carrier?"

He didn't know what a wand-carrier was, but he recognized the condescending tone it had been spoken with.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he stated firmly, his bag was securely pressed against his chest. He had food, enough to fill the stomach of five hungry kids, therefore he wasn't willing to fight. Flight would be much better...

"I will do you no harm, young one. Relax!"

Harry couldn't help but raise his eyebrows. He'd watched those beings and most of them wore a pointed beard, which was undoubtedly a sign of male adulthood, and the being before him wore no beard.

And he was male.

"You are a child, too, young one, so don't insult my wit by assuming I don't know." Oh, he could talk smartly if he wanted to, sometimes it confused the older bullies, but in this case he suspected it would be accepted as a challenge.

The stranger was taken aback.

"How long have you been watching us, human?"

Human. With this word he'd just confirmed what Harry had suspected. Something otherworldly was going on here. Maybe, today he would find his answers.

"I literally stumbled upon this place six months ago. I come here once or twice a week. It's part of my hunting-ground," at that he stiffened, and said sharply, "I am no thief."

He only stole when there was absolutely no other choice. He didn't like to beg, usually did something in return, but he preferred it to being a thief.

"I know that. I've been watching you."

Harry was unable to contain his curiosity any longer. "I don't understand. What is this place? Who are you? What the heck is going on?"

He practically blurted out his questions and was ashamed only moments later. However, the stranger looked at him in sudden understanding.

"You don't know?"

He shook his head.

"You walk in between the worlds..." The smaller being muttered, "But you have no idea."

"I know there are things going on that shouldn't be possible and yet they're real. The people in strange cloths, they seem... magical, not from this world and so do you and your ... I don't know... kin?"

"Kin is correct," he replied. "My name is Kertak and I am a goblin."

Goblin! He wouldn't believe it, hadn't he seen it all this with his very own eyes. The eyes that were covered with glasses the orphanage had organized for him, one of the few things he could call his own.

"What you've entered, young one..."

"Harry," he interfered.

"... Harry. You've entered the magical world. See, many thousand years ago everybody knew magic existed and stories of centaurs and giants, witches and wizards were told with respect by those who cannot perform magic. However, as time went by, more and more of different kin decided to go into hiding until at last wizards and witches –my kin calls them wand-carriers – decided to turn their back on those who are of their own flesh and blood. All those humans with magical power, the wand-carriers, created their own community, hidden from those without that power whom they call Muggles."

Harry's head felt very light and he had the urge to sit down. This was... But he'd seen it with his own eyes.

There was a secret community, a magical community? Did they live all over the world? Or just in London? So many questions, but then he suddenly thought of something Kertak had said.

"Why did you call me wand-carrier, then?"

"Because you're magical, too."

Of all things, this was the most unbelievable one. Harry looked back to his time in the orphanage and then said decidedly, "You're wrong, Kertak. I'm just an ordinary orphan. There's nothing magical about me. I've got to go back. Into my world. This place here... It's good to watch and dream, but it's not mine. I hope I'll see you again."

"We will, saràn."

"I'm sorry?"

"Friend."

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And they had seen each other again. Every once in a while, Kertak tried to convince Harry of his magical talent, but the boy still refused to believe it.

Maybe, (he had admitted some time ago) he had a bit of magic within him.

Just enough to see Diagon Alley.

Enough to explain those strange things happening to him.

However, it wasn't enough. He wasn't magical world material, not to mention Hogwarts (Kertak had told him lots about the School of Witchcraft and Wizardry). And that he could have proof today.

"It's the thirtieth," Harry started, "Tomorrow is the dead-line. No letter. I kept telling you."

It stung a little, though. Part of him had wished he was wrong.

"You don't know when you were born," Kertak replied, seemingly already prepared for the discussion. "You are magical enough. Remember, I can feel things like this."

"Nothing against your goblin senses, saràn. When it comes to me, you're wrong."

The thirty years old (equivalent with fourteen years of age amongst human kin) goblin only sighed. If Albus Dumbledore (one of the few wand-carriers respected by his people) didn't send a letter of acceptance, he would see to it himself.

The boy was incredibly magical, in fact. He hadn't noticed it at first for the child's magic was only visible when his core flared, but in the name of Drukanai, Harry's magic flared when it had to.

"We will see," he simply said.

"When will I be seeing you in Diagon Alley again?" Ever since the boy had found a home in the human orphanage, he hadn't been visiting Diagon Alley as regularly as before. But Kertak was glad his friend finally had been able to leave what the orphans simply called Hell. Oh, how many times had he asked him just to leave, however he hadn't been able to leave his friends behind.

"Can't tell you. I don't know." When he saw the goblin's reaction, he had to smile. "What? Does Natruk miss me so much?"

Kertak had to suppress a wince when Harry spoke so informally of their chief, but then, he didn't know, did he? He wasn't allowed to explain the goblin's hierarchy to a human being, but sometimes he had an unbearable urge to.

Nilràu Natruk liked Harry, they'd met several times and he was extremely fond of him, had allowed Kertak to tell many things they usually gave away to no outsiders.

Harry was practically kin. He had a natural way of acting respectfully without caring much for formalities, which was a characteristic highly admired by globins for it was rarely found amongst their own kin, as it wasn't often seen amongst humans whose behaviour always bordered on impertinence or if not actually was downright insulting.

"He's asked me yesterday how you are, in fact," he replied truthfully, but regretted his blunt words when he saw the child's face fall a little.

"Oh." So surprised! Harry was taken aback that someone would actually ask for his health. The goblin would never understand why those without parents and family were called 'orphans' in English. Gobbledegook had a much more fitting expression: orat, the Forgotten.

Kin was community, family. Harry had chosen his friends, had found kin, however he lacked an elder. Sister – why sister? They weren't related – Augustine was a honourable lady, but the human child took care of her and not the other way around. Elders took care of the youngsters. That was the way things were, had been and always will be. And yet, Harry had no elder, which saddened Kertak everyday anew.

They'd have taken him in were it possible for them to adopt a wizard child.

"I'll be visiting Diagon Alley as soon as possible."

"You will have to," Kertak said, "Otherwise you will be without supplies when you start at Hogwarts."

The human with almost unnaturally green eyes smiled tiredly. "Even if I should be accepted which I still believe won't happen... I don't have a penny to call my own."

"Hogwarts has trust funds for those who can't afford it and apart from that, I am sure Gringotts would have given you a loan."

Usually, it wasn't a wizard's best idea to meddle with goblins, but Harry was an exception.

They were silent for a moment until the human blurted out, "Tell me again the story of Evol, the centaur who lost his family only to find them again."

And the young goblin told.

He had always tried to tell wizards' tales as well for Harry was after all human, he had told him of the Wizarding World, however the boy

had never heard of the Ministry of Magic. Kertak knew he would be unable to mention it without cussing.

.-.-.-.-

Harry woke up in the middle of the night, convinced he'd heard something. He fingered with his right hand until he found his glasses. They didn't allow him to see properly, but they were good enough for daily life. Stuff he couldn't see he'd learnt to identify through hearing and touching. Right now, even perfect eyesight wouldn't have helped for it was dark.

There was the noise again, as if something hard would repeatedly tap against the window. Oddly, he heard no wind.

Quietly, so he wouldn't wake up Luke and Sara, he stood up, pulled the curtains away and opened the window.

He nearly screamed when he stared into an owl's glowing eyes.

His heart was beating heavily in his chest. Was this it? The acceptance letter? Or was it just some owl hunting at night?

Then he saw it. The precious letter fell into his hands and what he read nearly caused him to cry.

Mr H Potter

The Smallest Bedroom to the Left, First Floor

St Mary's Orphanage

London

Potter? His family name was Potter?

Kertak had mentioned the magical quill, which wrote down every human born who was allowed to go to Hogwarts. Somehow, he hadn't expected that quill to know his name.

Potter...

He wondered – not for the first time, but most definitely much more intensively – who his parents had been... What had happened... He was convinced they were dead, although he couldn't remember it.

He opened the letter and read in the dim light of the street lamps.

His nose nearly touched the paper when he read due to his poor eyesight, which was why he disliked it when people watched him reading. He looked rather unpractised at it, which he wasn't. His eyes got tired rather quickly, but he liked reading.

Shaking his head over his random thoughts he finished the letter.

Maybe, this Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall knew something about his parents.

He looked at the owl, the animal waited patiently.

"Over there's a tree," he whispered, though he wasn't sure whether it understood him, "Why don't you rest there? I'll give you a letter tomorrow."

When he watched the owl flying in said direction, happiness floated through him.

He was a wizard. He'd so much hoped he was.

He had been accepted to Hogwarts.

He was Harry Potter, an orphan for almost his entire life, but for the first time he wasn't just a serial-number or Harry.

His name was Harry Potter.

Thank you very much for all those encouraging reviews.

Please, tell me what you think of the second chapter!

Read and review!

Next Chapter: A Boy Lost, A Boy Found

Chapter 3: A Boy Lost, A Boy Found

'This will be a very interesting year.'

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, possessor of the Order of Merlin, First Class, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Grand Sorcerer and Supreme Mugwump at the International Confederation of Wizards, sat at his desk, answering yet another letter written by Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic. His thoughts were otherwise engaged, though.

The last letters of acceptance and sadly refusals would arrive today.

He had many important tasks in Great Britain's magical community, however what he enjoyed the most was his position as headmaster. Nothing filled him with more joy than seeing Hogwarts' students filling the castle after a summer break.

This year would be particularly interesting: Laci Longbottom would arrive at Hogwarts.

The Longbottoms had cut off a lot of former friendships and contacts and had lived isolated from the Wizarding World, a decision Professor Dumbledore had judged to be wise. He wondered what kind of boy he had become...

He simply hoped that his twin brother, Neville, had received enough attention over the years. The boy couldn't have had a simple childhood and even if it had been, it most likely would become rather difficult now.

For everybody knew Laci Longbottom's name.

But apart from Dumbledore and few other acquaintances of the Longbottoms, very few were even aware that the Boy Who Lived had a twin brother.

He signed his letter and just as he was finishing his signature, the door opened loudly causing him to spill ink all over the letter. Fortunately, a simple, non-verbal De-inking Spell (a charm he had invented many years ago) cleaned up the mess without destroying the letter. He looked up to see who had disrupted him.

A stern woman wearing square glasses and an emerald coat stood in front of him. He stood up worriedly when he saw her hands shaking. Her face was blanched.

"Minerva, what happened?" he exclaimed, immediately conjuring some teacups. He handed her a cup with hot, calming jasmine tea, but her hands shook so profoundly she spilled half of her mug's contents.

It was then when he realized that her left hand was clutched to a piece of paper.

Bad news, surely.

Had someone given notice that his or her children would be home-schooled? Minerva always took news like that rather calmly. He was about to fire-call Severus for a calming draft when his deputy headmistress finally decided to speak.

"He's alive," she whispered.

That was utterly unhelpful. Minerva was a well-educated woman, she was aware that Voldemort was most likely alive, but who else's life would fill her with so much dread?

"My dear?"

She opened her mouth only to close it again. Then, she handed over the sheet of Muggle paper.

He glanced over the letter, which had been written by an unpractised hand, as if a six-year-old had written it, yet every word was spelled flawlessly indicating that the author was older.

Dear Professor McGonagall,

Last night, an owl sent by you arrived at my room's window, delivering me the invitation letter to Hogwarts.

Be assured that it filled me with joy. I've received knowledge of the magical world by a friend five years ago; therefore I was aware of Hogwarts' existence. However, my environment mainly contains

people without any magical abilities and I was told that those born of non-magical families are being instructed by a teacher.

Since the delivery of my letter was simply via owl, I must assume that my parents knew of the magical world. You see, I never knew them. I've lived in an orphanage ever since I can remember and until yesterday I was completely unaware that my family name was Potter.

The sheet of paper nearly slipped out of Professor Dumbledore's hand at that.

I do know that an enchanted quill writes the acceptance letters, which is why I cannot be sure, but is it possible that you have information concerning my parents? I would be utterly grateful if you would provide me with them, should you have them.

That is my greatest wish. Of course, I am aware that you are very busy and I therefore do not expect you to come by personally, but a letter would be most welcome.

Furthermore, I will add questions to this letter should you reply it in writing:

The letter was addressed to "H Potter", is it absolutely impossible for the quill to be wrong? I don't want to take away another child's chance.

I was told that there is a trust fund for all those who do not possess enough money to buy school supplies. Is that information correct?

As you will have deducted from this letter, my writing skills are scarce: how high are the standards at your school for I know this to be the most prestigious school for magic in Great Britain?

Thank you very much for your time.

Yours sincerely,

Harry (Potter?)

Hadn't Professor Dumbledore already sat down, he would have been inclined to for his knees were unable to carry his weight any longer.

Harry Potter... He had no doubt that a letter addressed to 'H Potter' was delivered to the right person.

Harry was alive. Lily's and James' son was alive.

"Albus, please! Talk to me! I thought I knew what happened, but now I need to hear it again. How could such a mistake be made? Lily's and James' son grew up in an orphanage!" She waved an envelope in her hand. "I told the quill to write the address for 'H Potter' down once again and what came out is that he lives in an orphanage in London."

"Sit down, Minerva," the old headmaster said quietly. He himself had to remember what happened.

"I think we should start at the beginning: that fateful Halloween, ten years ago." He closed his eyes in pain and the man's ancient face looked very tired. "I was informed too late... that Voldemort," he ignored his colleague's flinch, "Was after the Longbottoms and the Potters, and not simply because of their work for the Order. They had become a target, but because I received information of that too late, there was no way of warning them." A single tear ran down Albus Dumbledore's face and Minerva McGonagall sobbed silently into a tissue.

"When I arrived... Well, I can only assume what happened. My guess is that Voldemort surprised the Potters and Longbottoms while they were playing with their sons. Frank and Alice were blasted aside at his arrival and therefore knocked unconscious. James, whose body I found next to the entrance door of Godric's Hollow, must have stood in Voldemort's way while Lily died protecting three boys, her own son and her best friend's children, and we all know what happened then... Voldemort pointed his wand at the boy closest to him and casted the killing curse, however Laci survived with nothing but a scar, becoming the Boy Who Lived while the most terrible dark wizard for several hundred years vanished, not dead but powerless. The latter I can only assume. Neville, Laci's twin brother, and Harry were unscathed when I found them, all of them were crying. Alice and Frank woke up when everything was over. They were ready to take Harry in raising him as their own, but I brought him to the person Lily would've wanted me to: her older sister, Petunia Evans."

"Yes," Minerva smiled a little at the memory, "I remember when Lily did everything to receive permission to have her big sister attend to her graduation. They looked so unlike each other, but Tuney – as Petunia was called by Lily – was such a nice girl." Her smile vanished. "Then she married that terrible Muggle..."

Albus' face grew very grim. "Vernon Dursley. Their marriage brought forth a son, Dudley, the only joyful event in that very short marriage."

"Was it only a rumour or did Lily truly castrate him when she found out about Vernon's physically abusive ways?" A small smile adorned the deputy headmistress' face. That rumour was a very fond memory of hers.

"She was very much willing to do it, but Remus had held her back." For a short moment, the sparkle in his eyes returned.

"Lily wouldn't have accepted anybody else but Petunia to raise her son and James of course intended regular visits by Remus, Peter and ..." A deep sigh, disappointment over Sirius Black's betrayal, "Petunia of course took him in and despite the grief of having lost her sister to magic a second time – for you know how long it took her to get to terms with Lily's departure for Hogwarts – she was willing to tell Harry everything she knew. However, fate was not so kind."

It was rare to see Albus Dumbledore so powerless, but he put his face in his hands and suddenly looked more like an old man than ever before.

"You do remember what story the Ministry had told the Muggles who'd witnessed Sirius' terrible crime? Gas explosion. You see, and I didn't know it myself, but an accident like this can kill a wizard as well should it happen too suddenly, too quickly for the magical core to send out bursts of accidental magic for self-preservation. That's what happened to Petunia, Dudley and, until now I believed, Harry. Their bodies were destroyed beyond recognition and I believed that it had taken Harry's life as well. It seems as if I've been wrong, it seems as if his accidental magic had time to react, but I am unable to tell you what his core did to survive."

"It doesn't matter," Minerva said, "Lily's and James' son lives!" She smiled so happily it was almost scary, "Do you want to meet him or shall I?"

A sudden memory of a pale, eleven-year-old who'd been able to use his powers to hurt at very young age mingled with unparalleled aptitude flashed through the older wizard's mind and for a short moment, he pondered on the idea never to introduce Harry Potter to the magical world at all.

For who knew whether that child would grow to be dark?

But the idea was gone again after the split of a second. Hogwarts had chosen and – as long as Harry wanted to – his place in Hogwarts would not be denied.

However, he was deeply worried for he knew that he couldn't expect a child possessing his parents' good heart... He'd never met them. All Dumbledore could hope was that his years at the orphanage hadn't turned Harry Potter into an uncaring soul.

He would have to keep an eye on Harry for he'll be cursed before he lost another orphan to darkness.

"Minerva, I would very much like to meet him myself, but you are welcome to join me." Gryffindor's Head of House didn't say anything; she merely turned into a tabby cat and looked at him expectantly. Even as a cat her gaze was severe and slightly accusing.

With a smile, the headmaster lifted the animal and walked towards the fireplace.

'This will be a very interesting year.'

Thanks to all those who reviewed and of course, MissGoalie75, my great Beta who corrected this chapter days ago which I failed to notice. So, sorry for the delay...

This chapter is short, I know, but reviews are appreciated...

Next Chapter: Caught in Between

Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall will be meeting Harry and Harry will find out quite a lot of things...

Chapter 4, part one: Caught in Between

"I think we're here, Minerva," Dumbledore said quietly, standing in front of an old one-story building. It looked poor but someone had taken care of it.

St Mary's Orphanage stood in large letters above the mailbox. Professor McGonagall, still in cat form was quiet, but her eyes surveyed the entire building and she ducked her head in a very human manner, as if it pained her to see the place where Lily's son had grown up.

"Shall we?" Without waiting for an answer, he approached the building. After some examination, he discovered the doorbell and rang it.

It was opened by a young woman with a distrusting, penetrating gaze. She was rather tall, thin and had short, brown hair. With one glance, she'd recognized Dumbledore's strange clothing.

"Yeah?"

"Alexandra!" a sharp voice was heard from behind; it was clear that the possessor of the voice wasn't used to being overly harsh.

"I'm sorry, Sister," the girl replied, her head ducked in shame, but there was no fear in her eyes when she'd heard her caretaker's voice, which was a good sign. "I apologize, sir. May I inquire why you're here?"

She stumbled over the words, seemingly not used to formalities, causing Dumbledore to smile kindly.

"My name is Albus Dumbledore and I would like to talk to the owner of this orphanage."

"That would be me." An elderly lady in a nun's gown appeared behind the young woman. It was the same voice he'd heard earlier, this time all sharpness had left her tone and was now all benevolence.

It wasn't the first time Albus Dumbledore talked to the caretaker of an orphanage, however this was the first time he had the impression

of talking to someone who truly worried about and cared for their charges like a parent.

"I am Sister Augustine and this is Alexandra, the eldest and therefore most protective of my charges." It was remarkable how that woman was capable of criticizing her protégé without sounding too harsh. Maybe, Harry had an acceptable childhood after all.

Minerva seemed to share his opinion for she started to purr. Alexandra's formerly distrusting expression disappeared and was replaced by girlish enthusiasm.

"Are you a stray?" she asked the cat when she kneeled down and started to scratch her behind the ear. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm afraid that she's mine, Alexandra, and be assured that she's well-fed." That resulted in a sharp, irritable noise coming from the Animagus; her mouth was opened wide and Dumbledore could swear she'd just prepared her claws.

"That is not what I meant, Minerva," he apologized immediately.

The young lady laughed good-humouredly. "You're a cool cat."

At that, the Deputy Headmistress in cat-form started to purr again, seemingly satisfied.

Sister Augustine smiled, but her eyes searched the wizard's blue ones. "Is there a special reason for your presence?" He could feel her survey him and when he opened his mouth, she interrupted, "Please, follow me into my office. Your companion can follow us, otherwise be assured that there are enough children in this house to take care of her."

Accepting it as invitation, Minerva McGonagall entered the orphanage, observing it with sharp eyes. Her sensitive ears and nose took in the environment and it surprised her to notice that although the place was crowded, it was also clean.

"Kitty!" an excited girl called running towards her, causing Minerva to tense up.

"Wow, easy there, Hannah!" the young woman who'd been introduced as Alexandra said and caught her before the girl had the opportunity to squash the Transfiguration teacher. "Sit away and wait for the cat to come. If she chooses to do so, then you caress her fur carefully and if she wants to leave, you let her. She can hurt you otherwise."

The girl did as she had been told and hadn't Professor McGonagall heard earlier that she was a charge, she'd expected Alexandra to be a caretaker as well. If Harry grew up in such an environment, well, then he'd been lucky.

The main reason why she'd chosen to take on her animal form was because she had the ability to see and inspect things she couldn't if she were human. Apart from that, she knew very well what Albus would be telling Sister Augustine: Harry's name had been written down at birth, that his parents had meant for him to go to boarding school and that everything would be paid for. Far more interesting would be Sister Augustine's assessment of Lily's son, however Albus would tell her about this later.

For now, she decided to explore the house and although everything was far too small, there were too many people while some of whom barely received enough food, there wasn't a single child that was dirty (above the average of dirt a child was inclined to have on their body) and they didn't seem to be afraid or stressed, which was a very promising sign.

She explored the first floor when all of a sudden a small boy came out of a room nearby, his feet connected uncomfortably with her abdomen and pelvis and she hissed in pain. The boy lost balance and fell on the ground. His head collided with the wood of a small trunk standing in the corridor.

Minerva worriedly ran to the boy limping heavily. He was conscious, but seemed shell-shocked for a moment before he started to cry in pain. Blood gushed out of the wound on his forehead and the Transfiguration professor was ready to transform shouldn't help arrive within the next ten seconds...

It didn't take as long.

Alexandra ran upstairs taking two steps at once and kneeled next to the boy.

"Tommy," her tone mixing exasperation and anxiousness indicated that this wasn't the first time, "Wha' happened? Come on, talk t'me!"

Obviously, the girl fell back into a rather dreadful accent under stress. The boy didn't answer, he just cried. Minerva was unable to tell whether it was out of pain or shock.

A boy in his late teens came out of another room. "What's up?" He too sounded frantic.

"Shut up, Kai and get help! Not the Sister, she ain't available. She's talkin' to some old guy, get Ry!"

"Ain't here. Could be in the yard, though," 'Kai' replied.

"Char!" Alexandra screamed instead.

Not unlike the young woman a moment before, a male teenager sprinted up the stairs. He looked at Tommy, his eyes widened.

"Where's he?" the only human female asked briskly.

"He met with Kertak, was really excited about somethin'. He wanted to meet 'im and left early this mornin'," the slim boy answered quickly. He looked at the blood running down the face of the little boy, who was crying in pain. Minerva felt anxious.

'For Merlin's sake, children! Call Sister Augustine! Call Albus!' She was still limping; the foot had hit her hip heavily. She wouldn't be able to walk downstairs and was unable to Apparate as long as she was in her Animagus form.

Alexandra cursed loudly.

"Get'im!" she spoke sharply, then looked at the boy she'd called 'Kai'. "Get a towel! We gotta stop the bleedin'."

Neither of the boys hesitated. 'Char' ran downstairs while the older teenager ran into what seemed to be a bathroom and came out with

a towel. He handed it over and Alexandra pressed it against Tommy, trying to soothe the upset little boy at the same time.

Minerva couldn't contain a loud scream when another door was opened, hitting her maltreated hip. She only hoped that it was loud enough for Albus to hear.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, kitty." A very young looking boy with brown hair and an obvious scar across his cheek knelt down next to her. He hesitantly reached forward.

Minerva's scream had alerted every single inhabitant of the first floor. There was a shy, little girl standing next to the boy who'd just injured her further, a blonde boy with sharp, blue eyes looking about the age of a First or Second Year student. Others peeked outside their rooms, but Alexandra ordered them to leave again.

The cat's superior hearing picked up very light footsteps running upstairs. The Deputy Headmistress was sure that had she been in her human form, she would've been oblivious of it. The young woman and the children who'd remained in the corridors certainly were except for the shy little girl who'd turned around before the voice was heard.

"Hey, Champ! Twice in two days. Are you trying to make some kind of record? That's not necessary, you know." The voice of a young boy was soft, but all expect for the girl earlier mentioned flinched a little.

Minerva detected relief on the undoubtedly eldest teenager's face. She looked up and smiled a little. The Transfiguration teacher followed her gaze and she didn't need to be introduced to that boy to know who it was: it was like looking at James Potter, except for those emerald eyes the Head of the Gryffindor House had only seen on a certain red-haired witch she'd loved deeply. Had she been human, she would've gasped.

Harry didn't remain standing on the staircase for long; he quickly took the last few steps to overcome the distance. Tommy's sobbing subsided a little while the young wizard checked the bleeding head-wound. He put the towel back in place and looked at the shy girl with a smile. "Sara, could you, Luke and Kai please go downstairs to the kitchen and get bandages along with a barrel of clean, warm water?"

Thank you." The girl nodded and grabbed Luke's hand. The boy followed without question, so did the teenager. The blond-haired child exchanged a short look with his contemporary and disappeared inside the room Tommy had come from.

"Alex,..."

"The Sister is talking to some old guy." To Minerva's surprise, she noticed that now the girl seemed a little relaxed, Alexandra's accent was much more proper than only few minutes ago.

"Tell Sister Margret, then. I've seen her in the garden earlier."

Unlike the others she didn't do as she was told, but looked at Harry sternly. The boy smiled reassuringly. "Head wounds always bleed heavily. He's a champ, Alex. He'll be okay."

That seemed to be enough for the girl left for the stairs. Now there were only Tommy and Harry left.

"Does anything else hurt, Tommy?"

The boy shook his head, still breathing unevenly with an occasional sob. Harry laid his hand over the towel and performed what seemed to be a practiced albeit non-magical ritual to make his young patient feel better.

"Pain, Pain, Pain. You are in vain, vain, vain. So go away, disappear and..." Tommy's soft voice joined in Harry's repetitive rhyme. "Don't come near for this is Tommy and it's a folly if you feel that you won't heal. Pain, Pain, Pain, go, go, go. You have no power here."

After the words were spoken, Lily's son removed the towel and Minerva stared when she saw that the blood flow had stopped. It was still red, but the bleeding was gone.

The blonde boy stepped out of the room again carrying a small teddy bear.

"Thanks, Grey," Harry said, which was repeated quietly by Tommy who clutched the bear at his chest, hugging it tightly.

Sara, Luke (most likely Lucas) and 'Kai' returned to the first floor. The latter was carrying a barrel with steaming water, Luke had some towels and Sara brought a glass half full with orange juice.

"That is very nice of you, thank you Sara," Harry smiled, took the glass and handed it carefully to the youngest boy of the group. While the latter drank from the glass, Harry cleaned the wound with water and carefully wrapped the bandage around Tommy's head. The boy didn't even flinch.

Alexandra came upstairs, the teenager from earlier ('Char' if she remembered correctly) at her heels.

"I told the Sister you had everything under control, but I told her of the incident."

"Thanks. Speaking of which....," the boy with emerald eyes said, "What happened?"

"Kitty," Tommy whimpered, "Kitty hurt because I."

And for the first time, Harry's eyes directly met Minerva McGonagall's. His worry over the small boy had obviously prevented him from noticing anything else.

He looked at her and for a moment she wasn't sure what he saw for his head was tilted sideways in obvious confusion. Then he closed his eyes, shook off whatever bothered him and showed her his hand.

Carefully, she came forward a couple of steps, but the pain in her hip was considerably bad.

"Hush," Harry whispered, "Stay there, lady! Let me take a look at you." Very slowly he approached her and then caressed her head. He did so repeatedly and patiently until his hand slowly but steadily caressed her back only to touch her injury. It was remarkable how little it hurt.

"I don't think your bones are broken, but you'll be sore for a couple of days." He spoke to her as if he knew she was human. "You're not angry at Tommy, are you? He didn't mean to cause you pain."

At that, Minerva looked at the little boy, whose lips quivered and she meowed softly only to purr again and the child smiled in relief.

Soft hands caressed her head again and words spoken so lowly only she could hear them left the eleven-year-old's mouth: "You're one smart cat, lady." She felt warmth spreading from her future student's fingertips and it coursed through her body lingering like a soothing blanket around her sore hip. The pain subsided slightly and Minerva wondered what, in the name of Merlin, had just happened.

"Harry, are you up there?" Sister Augustine's voice called from below the staircase.

"Yes, Sister," was the reply.

"Please come down, there is gentleman who wants to talk to you." The hand which had still stroked her head halted almost painfully grabbing her ear. The child looked as if he'd been petrified.

"He'd be glad if you would take along his cat as well."

'His cat? Albus, you will pay for this!'

Harry chuckled when he heard her derisive snort. "I'm sure he didn't mean it. Cats belong to nobody but themselves." He looked at his roommates and told them he'd be back soon.

Carefully, he picked her up without hurting her further and as quietly he'd come he walked downstairs. He halted on the middle of the steps seemingly frozen when his eyes met Albus'.

"Wizard. You're a wizard's cat." Emerald eyes surveyed her intensely. There were only few people who managed to have her check her composure when they looked at her, but it seemed as if that boy would be able to do just that given a few years' time. "That's why you understand what I'm saying. You're a Familiar."

Well, that was surprising. She'd of course noticed Harry's note which had said he was aware of the magical world, but until this moment she hadn't really tried to make sense of it.

"Hello, Harry," Albus greeted softly with a smile. His eyes sparkled. If he was surprised to see a miniature form of James with Lily's eyes,

he didn't show it. "My name is Albus Dumbledore." Minerva could feel the boy's heartbeat exhilarate.

"It's an honour that you take your time to meet with me, Headmaster." The words were spoken in awe as if he couldn't believe that an important man like the headmaster of his school would even bother to look at him, not to mention visit him.

Sister Augustine looked confused for a moment before she realized. "Of course, you've received notice of the acceptance not too long ago. Why don't you two go outside? I will make sure that the other children will leave you alone. The door to the backyard is straight ahead, Mr Dumbledore."

Albus was aware that the nun wanted to have a short word with Harry in private, thanked the elderly lady and went ahead humming a little.

As soon as the door closed, Sister Augustine laid a hand on her charge's shoulder and smiled brightly. "Why haven't you told me, Harry? That is amazing news and very well deserved, I'd say."

"Thank you, Sister Augustine," Harry replied in a low voice, but his eyes sparkled happily, "But there are many questions left and I didn't want to disappoint anyone if I told something that wouldn't come true."

"Mr Dumbledore sounded very sure," the nun said confusedly.

"That's good to know, but not the only question I have," he was quiet for a moment before he spoke in a voice that sounded so lost, it would have brought tears to Minerva's eyes hadn't she been a cat, "He might know something about my parents."

"Oh." Realization dawned and she kissed him softly on the forehead. "Go ahead. I won't stop you."

Harry smiled, turned around and went outside, the cat still at his chest.

He saw the tall man with long silver hair and beard. His cloak's colour wasn't too striking for it was a rather dark blue, but the young boy suspected that this was merely because he'd entered the non-

magical world. His nose was long and crooked as if broken twice. He stood at Harry's favourite spot below the large tree. Hesitantly, his heart beating loudly in his chest, he drew near.

"You may ask anything you want, Harry for I imagine that this was a shock and I apologize that it was. As soon as your questions are answered as well as I'm able to do so, I will explain some things myself." At that he sat on the ground indicating the boy to do the same.

There was a moment of silence before Harry blurted out, "Did you know my parents? What happened to them? What were they called? How'd they die – I'm sure they're dead, but I don't know what happened. Did they attend to Hogwarts? Am I really Harry Potter? Kertak said that Potter was a name he knew, but he couldn't give me any specifics. What happened?" The boy's voice broke, despair shone out of those green eyes and only greatest amount of control kept the Deputy Headmistress from transforming on the spot and hugging the child.

Albus seemed to be fighting back the same urge. "Their names were Lily and James Potter, Harry, and they were some of the best people I've ever met in my life and coming from an old man like me, that says something."

Lily and James. Lily and James. Lily and James. Harry repeated the names several times in his mind, never to forget them again.

"They didn't leave because they chose to do so, did they?" There wasn't even the slightest doubt in Harry's voice. He really believed they hadn't abandoned him willingly.

"Only death was able to separate them from you and even that is not enough for those we love and who've loved us never truly leave."

Thankfully, the Headmaster looked away when the tears threatened to fall down. The eleven-year-old quickly rubbed his eyes.

"As for what happened... That is a long story. You see, twenty years ago, a terrible war that would last for eleven years broke out in the Wizarding World."

Harry nodded thoughtfully: "Yeah, I know. It was a time when all non-human magical beings were hunted down, mistreated (in a house-elf's case), tortured and often killed. Non-magical humans were among the victims, too, and those who come from non-magical families but were wizards and witches were thought to be worthless. Kertak didn't go into details, though."

'Kertak?' As far as Minerva knew, that was a goblin name.

"This terrible and utterly false policy has existed in Wizard Society for a very long time, but a dark wizard whose name was Lord Voldemort..." the cat twitched nervously in Harry's arms, "On his conquest for power he spread that state of mind across the world thereby gathering followers around him. He started a reign of terror across Great Britain and deeply into Europe's mainland. Few stood in his way, but your mother and father, they fought. Voldemort reached the very summit of his power when he targeted your family and the Longbottoms, who were close friends of your parents. It was on Halloween, ten years ago, when..."

And so Albus Dumbledore told the story of the Potters' death as well as the becoming of the Boy Who Lived. He mentioned neither the Prophecy, of course, nor the betrayal of Sirius Black, but he told what happened that night at Godric's Hollow.

"So," Harry said when the tale was told, "I owe my life to Laci Longbottom."

His tone indicated a matter of great importance and the Headmaster looked at Harry. "May I inquire what that means to you?"

"Well, I'm not really into wizard's society. I mean, I saw... things when I stumbled across Diagon Alley and Kertak told me a lot, but I don't know what it means for a wizard to owe your life to another... It's just: where I am from? A person saves your life, you owe them your loyalty. You don't oppose them, even if you don't agree with what they do. You owe them until the debt's repaid. If you don't like that person, you get out of their way, but you leave them alone. The rule only counts for contemporaries, though."

It sounded remarkably like a wizard's debt, but not quite. However, Albus Dumbledore decided to resolve all possible misunderstanding: "Laci Longbottom saved us all Harry, but you don't owe him your

loyalty for what he did wasn't done consciously and therefore cannot count as a life's debt."

There was silence for a moment and the young boy looked deep in thought. Then, he nodded.

"Of course, I hope that you and the Boy Who Lived will get along," the headmaster smiled, "But you shouldn't do it for duty's sake."

A soft smile emitted from the earnest boy's face. His eyes were clouded a little, undoubtedly he was thinking of his parents.

When he started to speak, his voices sounded far away as if looking into memory. "If the Longbottoms survived... There was no fire, was there?"

"Godric's Hollow – your parent's residence – was destroyed that night, but neither the Longbottoms nor you were hurt, but I don't believe there was an actual fire. Why?"

"Because that's an early memory of mine: a fireball and exhaustion a moment later. After that, I wound up in an orphanage." He decided it was best not to mention the green light, though he couldn't explain why.

Dumbledore looked at him in surprise. Clearly not having expected this, he told Harry that he probably remembered his aunt's death who'd taken him in. When he mentioned her name, Harry interrupted.

His voice sounded rough and broken, "Aunt Tuney and Duddy."

"I am so sorry, Harry," Dumbledore said, all sparkle had left his blue eyes and had been replaced by sorrow, "I am so sorry you weren't allowed to grow up with neither your parents nor your aunt."

The young boy with emerald eyes gulped and looked away blinking furiously. He looked deeply in thought when he said, "They thought my name was Howard first for I could only say 'Hawwy', but I only listened to the name Harry. That's my real name, isn't it?"

"It is. Harry James Potter, that is your name."

"Thanks," the black-haired boy spoke softly. He wondered if the headmaster knew what was in a name.

What followed was companionable silence and Albus Dumbledore gave Harry time to recollect. When he saw the kid's troubled thoughts lighten up a bit, he continued: "You had several questions, Harry, and I would understand if you want to ponder on what you've heard earlier we answer those. Shall I come back another time?"

"No," a firm gaze met the old wizard who startled at the sudden tranquillity. "You've given me too much of your time already, sir... I don't want to keep you from your responsibilities."

"You are my responsibility, Harry. As future student at my school, you are my responsibility."

"But you will have more important tasks than informing me." Harry thought, but he refrained from mentioning for he was afraid that the man would feel insulted.

He liked the blue-eyed man: there was wisdom and benevolence in his gaze. And he'd known his parents and cared about them very much.

"I think we've both established that you are Harry Potter, because first of all, the quill is never wrong, second of all, you look like James when he first started at Hogwarts except for your eyes and those would give you away anywhere. You have your mother's eyes."

Harry tilted his head and smiled. For a brief moment he wondered what they'd looked like.

"You also asked for the financial aspect. You were correctly informed: there is a trust fund, however... Your parents, especially your father's family was wealthy. I believe their vaults at Gringotts were frozen after you have been perceived dead. You will regain access to them, of course. I will see it done."

Vaults? Surely, he'd misunderstood him. Yes, that had to be it! Either that or he wouldn't be able to gain access...

"You've said earlier, Harry, that you've already entered Diagon Alley..." Minerva was glad that her colleague had finally decided to

mention a topic which had been burning under her fingertips, or claws.

"Oh," the last of the Potters shook his head to get rid of whatever thought he'd had, "Yes, well... A couple of years ago, we... life was a little tough and I had to explore... Anyway..." Whatever had happened, the green-eyed boy wasn't willing to talk about it. "I was about five, six when I literally stumbled into the Alley. I didn't understand what it was first, but my friends couldn't find the place and I just knew that whatever it was, it wanted to stay hidden. So, I went there occasionally and well, one day I met Kertak, a young goblin and he explained about the Magical World." Harry's eyes widened slightly as if he still couldn't believe that it actually existed. He smiled into memory, "He told me I was a wizard, well, a wand-carrier, but I didn't believe him."

All of a sudden, the boy looked panicked. "I'm not..." He stopped trying to find the right words, "I'm not powerful, sir. I'm just Harry. I'm sure I barely made the mark to actually be accepted to your school and I can't write very well. I can read," he emphasized it for that was important since many he knew weren't capable of that. He wasn't much, but he was able to read, although it tired him, "But... Well, you read my letter. It's not something I'm used to do, but I promise I will improve on that..."

Albus Dumbledore lifted his hand in a calming motion. "My dear boy, calm down! Be assured that were you not capable, the letter would've never come. I am convinced you will fit perfectly into Hogwarts and concerning your writing abilities... Well, this school is a thousand years old, Harry. Not every child who came to us was able to write or read for that matter. We've always found a way to educate them and since you can do both, I wouldn't worry about it." His eyes showed a soft twinkle and Harry smiled cautiously in return.

In the meanwhile, both Dumbledore and the Deputy Headmistress pondered on what the boy in front of them had just revealed: Harry had befriended a goblin. It was almost unheard of, but it gave the old wizard hope in a department he'd never been able to succeed: Wizard Community's relationship to all those beings magical but not human. Humans – whether magical or not – had a tendency to view anything unlike them inferior. In his younger years, he'd been foolish enough to think so as well. Years and years of experience had taught him how utterly wrong that mind's view was.

It was a small step, really, a step taken by someone who wasn't aware that it was a step, but it was one.

"Diagon Alley leads me to another matter, Harry," he said, instead of voicing his thoughts, "Since you know the Alley, do you want to go there alone or do you want someone to come with you?"

Something flickered in the boy's eyes causing the headmaster to add, "That someone will have to go there anyway, so it would be a simple matter of accompanying each other."

Once again, the black-haired boy smiled, his emerald eyes shone brightly. "If that is the case, sir, I'd love to have some company."

Dumbledore couldn't help but chuckle. He wanted to voice another question when the door crashed open and a little girl ran out in obvious distress. Before he could say anything, the underage wizard was already standing.

It seemed as if Harry knew very well how to access his magic, if consciously or not.

"Sara, hey, little one," the green-eyed boy whispered as soon as his arms had embraced the child, "Calm down! What's up?"

"You mustn't leave," the distraught young girl said sobbing heavily, "You can't go away." The Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry saw the realization dawn on Harry's face and what followed was an expression of profound despair.

"Hush," he murmured hugging the girl a little close, "Sara..." The girl's maroon eyes shown bright with tears and it didn't take a lot of empathy to see that the eleven-year-old's heart broke into pieces.

He turned around, his slim, small body straightened and spoke solemnly, "Headm... Professor Dumbledore, thank you very much for accepting me to your school. It is an honour that you've decided to come and see me personally but I must..."

"Don't say one word," the young woman, Alexandra, stood in the doorway, several children at her tail. She lifted one hand and the rest of the charges stopped dead while she strode forward.

"Sir, I apologize for the little confusion, but I don't want you to take any of Harry's words for granted until we've talked to him."

"Alex," the boy's face was red, clearly embarrassed and he glanced at Dumbledore only to see an understanding smile.

"As it happens," the old wizard said benignly, "I've business to take care of in London. What time do you expect me to come back?"

"Not after seven, that's when the little ones have to go to bed and I don't want you to disturb them." She was a very distrustful girl, but her protectiveness was very comforting.

"Alex!" The name was spoken sharply and his eyes flashed, but his right hand was still stroking soothingly the little girl's hair thereby taking away some acidity of it.

"Very well. If that is good for you, Harry?"

"I don't want you to waste your time..." the boy began, but Dumbledore interrupted, "Be assured, I won't and I am very willing to give you time to think."

Hesitantly, James' son nodded, and the powerful wizard looked at Minerva, who immediately understood and went ahead.

"I'm sorry." It was obvious how terribly bad Harry felt for not having his answer straight away. He couldn't very well know that to see him so worried about those whom he seemed to feel responsible for, filled the older man with profound relief. Harry Potter wasn't lost, in fact, he was a good child. First impressions were deceiving sometimes, but it was unlikely that this one could be so utterly wrong.

They left the orphanage, Dumbledore picked up Minerva and was just about to Disapparate when a voice called: "Hey! Wait up!"

Minerva recognized the teenager who ran towards them. His name – or rather, his nickname – was Char.

"Yes?" Dumbledore asked in a friendly manner, but the slim young man flinched slightly and drew back.

"Look," he began after a moment's recollection, "There are things going on here I don't get... Harry musta gotten your note last night and you're already here, most likely caus'a his reply... I know that's weird, but well, Harry's strange. He's amazin', but he's strange and so are you... So, I guess your invitation is 'cause, you know, you have somethin' in common. I don't need t'know what tha' is. Harry can do things others can't, but he never hurts people and I'm pretty sure you don't like doing tha' either for he has a sixth sense when it comes to tha'..." He shook his head, seemingly realizing he wasn't making much sense, "What I'm tryin' t'say is that he's the most selfless guy I ever met and Sara doesn't like the idea of him leavin', which is why he most likely wants to decline now, even if it breaks his heart in the process... Just... Don't give up on 'im, okay? Promise me you won't just walk away and never come back, just 'cause he loves us. He's given up so much to help us, it's time we give it back, but tell that to a five-year-old girl."

If the slightest doubt concerning Harry's personality had remained, it vanished after that small speech of a boy Dumbledore was sure never spoke to adults. His tense shoulders, the aversion of eye-contact, the pauses... He disliked standing here with every fibre of his being and yet he was willing to do it for his friend.

"Mr..."

"Char, sir... I mean, just Richard."

"Richard, I promise you that Harry will hear from me again."

That's the first part of the forth chapter. I hope you liked it.

Thanks for the forty people who've put me on Story alert and a special thank you to all those who reviewed.

And of course MissGoalie75, my patient Beta... You're great. Thanks for doing this

Please, read and review!

Chapter 4, Part Two: Caught in Between

While Char fell back in order to pursue the stranger Harry, Sara (who had refused to let go of her protector) and Alexandra entered St Mary's. The five-year-old girl was sobbing quietly, hiding her face in Harry's chest as soon as they stopped at the staircase leading to the first floor.

Fifteen pairs of eyes looked at the three orphans who'd just entered (it didn't take long for the underage wizard to notice that Char was missing. Sister Augustine most likely had gone upstairs to see for Angelina and Carla since it was time for their nap), yet nobody spoke.

Sara's tears had managed to bring Harry's mind back to reality: he would have to leave them; he wouldn't be able to take care of them anymore.

The mere thought broke his heart. He couldn't just go and leave everything behind he'd come to love so dearly.

He would've loved to see the magnificent castle that had to be Hogwarts, would've loved to become what he had never believed himself to be.

However, he wasn't needed there by any of those children he most likely would never be able to bond with. They were Others, or at least most of them... Children with families. They would never understand.

He briefly wondered if Kertak might be able to help him for he wanted to study magic so much... But that meant leaving everything behind he cared for. What would happen to his favourite accident-prone Tommy? Or little Sara and Luke who'd sought his proximity at nights for the last two years (ever since they'd been brought to Hell)?

The crying girl answered that question. He noticed a figure drawing near and noticed quickly that it was Char.

"I..." he started, but he was at loss what to say.

It was Kai who spoke up. "I didn't know you were applying to other schools."

It didn't sound reproachful.

Curious, yes, but not reproachful.

Good. The simple questions first.

"I didn't," Harry explained, "They found me. My name was written down practically at birth..."

Char's eyes widened in understanding: "Does that mean... Who...?"

"Yes," Harry said and avoided eye-contact for a moment. It was always strange when an orphan's past came to light – not only for the child involved, but for their friends as well. It usually raised more questions than answers. "My name is Harry Potter. My parents' names were Lily and James. They died ten years ago."

Silence followed that statement for the three short sentences spoke volumes:

'I am someone. My name is Harry Potter. I am a person.'

'My parents existed. They were real once upon a time. They had names, too.'

'They didn't abandon me. I've said it a hundred times. They loved me.'

"So," Alex broke the silence, "What about that guy? Didn't he think about finding you a home?"

Harry immediately grew protective of the kind wizard. "The man's name is Professor Dumbledore and I had another home. I was brought to my aunt, but she died, too. In a fire."

The way he said the last word caused the older ones to shiver. Sara didn't say anything, but pressed her face a little more tightly into his chest.

"What happened then, I honestly don't know." 'It is a good question, though.' And yet, it certainly wasn't the headmaster's job to make sure he had a home.

The only people who could be blamed for the past he'd had were those who'd made it hell, especially Sullivan. Anyway, he'd long come to understand that had life not been harsh on him, he would've never tasted its good sides, would've never met Char or Sara or Luke and most likely wouldn't have known of their existence, including Kertak. As much as it ached him, as much as he wanted to fall into his parents' arms just once, he wasn't willing to give up his chosen family in the process.

That didn't mean he didn't desire to know more about his parents, ever since he'd heard the names the wish was so intense it took his breath away.

They had died for him. They'd loved him so much that they had been willing to die for him.

"Sister Augustine mentioned it was a boarding school..." Grey chimed in, but fell silent again when Sara started sobbing again. She very well knew the significance of it.

Unlike Tommy.

"Why Sara sad?" he asked. The sensitive, little boy's lower lip quivered. He hated it when his family cried.

Before Harry could speak up, the girl lifted her face and explained teary-eyed, "Harry goes away." Her voice broke, "Won't come back."

Tommy still looked confused. He'd been at St Mary's his entire life and nobody he deeply cared about had ever been inclined to leave. He didn't understand the significance of leaving, unlike Sara.

The raven-haired boy cupped her face in his hands and kneeled down so he would look up to her.

"I've not decided yet, Sweetie." His voice was soft.

"Don't be an idiot," Marco intervened sharply. The fifteen-year-old had arrived after the kids who'd escaped from Hell. He'd been

picked up from the streets straight to St Mary's, which was equivalent to a vacation in the eyes of those who'd seen other orphanages. He was self-reliant and wasn't yet fully integrated into the crazy dynamics that was life at St Mary's orphanage. He wouldn't think twice should he receive such a chance:

Proper education.

Enough food.

Most likely, you only had to deal with the kids you shared a room with, but nobody else.

Harry was an idiot!

"Hey! Watch it!"

Char was nothing if not exceedingly protective of Harry (not that he needed it with strangers, but the emerald-eyed kid let slide too much when he was confronted with insults coming from people he cared for) and advanced Marco. He was shorter than the lean teenager, but he was a good fighter if needed to be.

Kai immediately stepped in between. If a fight broke out, they would show Harry that it was impossible for him to leave. The guy nearly broke at Sara's tears. There was no reason to make it even harder for him. Kai was practical. He knew this was a unique chance for the small boy (whom he couldn't help but respect despite the age difference). He would do anything so Harry would take it.

Fortunately, Alex agreed for her opinion counted as much as Sister Augustine's or Harry's.

She ignored Marco and Kai, but she gave them a look that clearly said something along the lines of, "You can crash each other's skulls another day, you morons."

"I think you should go, Ry," she said evenly, earning a very angry look from Luke who'd been fidgeting ever since he'd seen his young friend break into tears. He didn't want Harry to leave either, but mostly he was worried about Sara whom he loved like a little sister.

The girl started to weep again, completely distressed over the thought that Harry might leave. The boy held her a little closer and he watched each face:

The teenagers all looked as if they were in approval of his departure while his contemporaries' feelings were mixed: Grey and Luke were the ones who seemed to oppose the most, but that wasn't a surprise since they'd gone through Hell together.

The little ones were distressed, but Harry couldn't tell whether it was due to Sara's reaction or due to the situation. Gabriel reacted different from the others, though. The six-year-old looked at him, turned around and ran upstairs.

The underage wizard's heart broke into pieces once more.

Feeling a little desperate, he looked at Char whose eyes displayed a storm of different emotions. When their eyes met however he nodded encouragingly.

But Harry shook his head.

"I can't just leave." It was a mere whisper, but it displayed his utter despair, as if something had just torn him in two: Harry, the orphan with his large-little family – (who knew what the place would look like in a year? Unlike common families, orphanages always changed their faces: some were adopted, others left... It would never be the same again) – and Harry Potter, the underage wizard who would love to learn at Hogwarts (he wanted to understand the magical world better, wanted to connect with Kertak by being able to add knowledge of his own. He desired to live in his parents' world).

"I didn't mean to tell you guys like this," Alex interrupted briskly, "But... As you know I'm eighteen." Harry couldn't suppress a flinch. Alex was going to leave, too? "School's over and well... I got myself a part-time job in the bakery about five minutes from here. The hours are terrible, but it'll allow me to stay here if..." She caught the eyes of Sister Augustine, who was quietly descending the stairs, "Sister, is there the slightest chance you might reserve my bed for me? I'll pay," she said immediately when she recognized her caretaker's shocked expression, "And I'll take care of the little ones. Sister?" Her tone displayed concern for Sister Augustine's eyes had started to moisten.

Quickly, the old lady approached her eldest ward and heartily embraced her. "You are always welcome here. Thank you, my child, thank you."

Harry looked away blinking heavily. He couldn't do this.

He had to talk to Kertak, never matter his decision, he had to talk to Kertak first.

Sara suddenly tugged his ragged, brown shirt and he looked down.

"Didn't want to make you sad," the little girl whispered and Harry embraced her once again, holding her tight.

"It doesn't matter, little one. Whatever I decide I'll be sad. That's not your fault." He softly kissed her forehead.

Everybody looked at him expectedly, but he could only shake his head. He didn't have an answer. A fact that puzzled Luke...

Harry always knew what to do. He made decisions within the split of a second and he never failed. He was Harry. He just knew what the right decision was. Why did he look so sad?

"Come, children," Sister Augustine said, obviously having picked up on the eleven-year-old's distress. Therefore, she led all the children between the age of three and ten into the living room (Sara was patiently pried out of Harry's arms) and left the older ones to themselves.

.....

Meanwhile, Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall had sat down in a quiet corner of The Leaky Cauldron. The Deputy Headmistress had changed into her human form as soon as Albus had Apparated them to Diagon Alley.

So far, they hadn't said or done much except for ordering something to drink. The silence was broken by the current Transfiguration teacher of Hogwarts.

"It's a good home." Everything else she couldn't quite voice. Not yet.

"Apparently, he has only been living there for six months according to Sister Augustine," Dumbledore replied, deeply in thought. Harry was certainly an interesting boy.

"Oh," was the mere reply, "Where has he lived before, then?"

"She wouldn't tell me. At first, she said she hardly ever knew of her charges' pasts when they arrived at that age, but concurred that she was aware where he came from. When I asked for clarification however, she changed the subject." The witch hadn't witnessed her old friend frown often and on those rare occurrences it had never been a good sign.

"Do you reckon he had to live on the streets?" It was a terrible thought: that small, thin boy with green eyes, a child of the streets? Dependent on the mercy of Muggles to provide him with an occasional penny, or, worse even, to be forced to steal? Unimaginable.

Instead of answering, the headmaster lifted his hand and Tom arrived at their side.

"Professor Dumbledore. May I help you, sir?" The owner of the Leaky Cauldron flashed a polite but genuine smile. They respected each other very much, mainly for they both often dealt with Muggle affairs (when you lived at the very borders of the two worlds it was unavoidable to deal with Muggles as well) and exchanged their thoughts rather frequently.

"Yes, Tom. I would like to stimulate your memory, my friend. Six months ago, did something occur, a scandal, perhaps? Orphanages would be involved in that."

The younger wizard's brows frowned in concentration then he met the headmaster's blue eyes. "I couldn't tell you whether it was six months ago, but yes, something happened. I cannot give you any specifics, but an orphanage caught fire. Nobody was killed, but further investigation has brought forth that terrible things happened there. Physical abuse was mentioned, starvation... Horrible. I'm sorry that I cannot tell you more."

It took a moment before the powerful wizard regained his composure. For a short moment, his face had turned white.

"Thank you," he replied, surprised to notice how calm his voice sounded.

"You're welcome, Professor," the other man answered, bowed a little and left.

"Albus, do you think...?" Minerva's lips formed a thin line. This couldn't be. Life wasn't that cruel, but her friend's broken expression told the unbearable truth. "How...?"

"I merely asked the right question and used the opportunity to take a glimpse of her mind without actually entering it. I would never use Legilimency on a Muggle, Minerva. As for Harry's past..." He sighed, "At least, he is at a proper place now." He suddenly looked very tired, "I will have to investigate what happened the night the orphanage started to burn..."

"Albus, you do not actually believe that Harry lit that fire, do you?" She was horrified at the mere thought. The boy was a good child. She'd seen him take care of the younger orphans. There wasn't a glimpse of malice in his demeanour.

"He can do it. Harry is very much aware how to gain access to his magical core and when he's scared enough..."

"Or afraid that someone is being hurt he cares about..." Minerva added. She thought of the way he'd treated the younger children and suddenly, it didn't seem impossible anymore.

"Before we speak of this any further, Minerva, please, tell me what you saw."

And so she told him how deeply Harry was respected by his peers and of his basic knowledge in healing. She was about to mention how he'd treated her when another thought came to mind.

"A goblin befriended him, Albus, and that goblin told him quite a lot about the magical world."

"Yes, that's most curious, indeed," the former Transfiguration teacher said thoughtfully. The fireplace flared green, but Dumbledore wasn't paying attention to it, unlike Professor McGonagall.

"Severus," she called causing the tall, black-haired man who'd just elegantly left the fire-place, to turn towards her. His black eyes didn't express the slightest surprise as if seeing them in the Leaky Cauldron was a daily occurrence.

He approached them; his greeting was quiet and once again, didn't display any sentiment that would remotely remind of curiosity.

"Severus, my boy," Dumbledore smiled, his eyes sparkling, "Please, sit down."

Minerva had come to cherish her young colleague, she truly had.

It wasn't often to have a conversation with someone who could hold their own against her, apart from Albus and Filius. However, while Albus was in brilliance and power way out of her league, Filius wasn't particularly fond of intellectual banter, unlike Severus.

Oh, it had taken a while before she'd been able to accept her former student as colleague, especially considering he'd been such a foolish young man and had become (temporarily) a follower of You-Know-Who. Yet, she'd come to like him, no matter how many times she wanted to shake him for the way he treated her chil... the children of her House ('Cubs', as her colleagues called them when they thought she wasn't listening).

However, despite everything, she didn't think it a good idea to discuss James Potter's son in front of the tall, brooding man for he'd hated him with passion.

"May I inquire what you're doing here, my boy?" Albus said unaware of his Deputy Headmistress' stream of thought.

"The Apothecary hasn't supplied me with all the ingredients I've ordered, therefore I've decided to come and purchase them myself," the tall man answered stiffly.

Dumbledore gestured him to sit down, who complied a little reluctantly. Severus Snape was an exceedingly determined, hard-working man who spent as little time as he could by indulging in the art of small talk.

The headmaster had tried and was still trying everyday to have his youngest colleague, whom he cared about most dearly, relax a little. He hadn't been very successful so far. Today, he gave it another go by asking Tom to bring Severus the delicious tea he'd ordered for himself and by asking him how he was doing...

"I'm nearly finished brewing the potions meant for the Hospital wing."

... It seemed as if success had to wait for another day.

Instead, he asked the Potions Master a question he knew would be answered without receiving an inquiry in return. Not because the man wouldn't notice, but because he was very much willing to wait until the old wizard decided to share his thoughts.

"Severus, Fire's Spark allows its user to deduct a fire's origin, doesn't it?"

Black eyes looked straight into blue ones as if trying to mentally dissect the question without asking.

"Yes, Headmaster. However, the liquid has to be poured over the ashes within twenty-four hours after the last flames died."

"If I would want to find the origin of a fire that burned, let's say, a year ago... Is there a potion that would let me do that?"

It was fascinating to see Severus Snape think. Many people's eyes didn't on a singular spot but darted around in a room. Severus grew absolutely still. There was a spark deep within the normally cold, black orbs. He didn't have to answer. Such a potion did not exist, but there was a chance that someday there might be one.

"It should be possible," the tall man said quietly, deep in thought. That alone displayed that his mind was already in his laboratory for he usually answered a question properly, "What is your goal, Headmaster? Whether or not the fire was of magical origin?"

'Oh, Severus, my boy! You are too perceptive.'

"Precisely," he answered instead.

Slowly, the powerful young wizard nodded.

"When exactly do you need it, Headmaster, for there is Paracelsus' Law after all. 'The farther away is thy past sought, the further you shall have brewed thy draft.' I will also need the ashes resulting from the fire. Its date would help." A moment there was silence, before he added, "And its location."

"You shall receive everything it in due time, Severus. Thank you very much." The strict man nodded shortly. What followed was another moment of idle chitchat as the youngest teacher at Hogwarts called it before he excused himself and left.

"For a moment there, I thought you were about to tell whom we've visited," Minerva said as soon as the Slytherin's Head of House had closed the door behind him.

"And I will," the old wizard said, "Tonight. In my office. After I have enforced magically the items that lay there." He sighed, "It is a very difficult topic for him, very painful and he wouldn't have appreciated to have to deal with those sentiments in public."

The Transfiguration teacher agreed with that. Her students (even when they came to know her after they'd graduated from Hogwarts) always expected her not to notice anything, but it wasn't a secret what Severus Snape had felt for Lily Evans, at least not to her. Maybe, it wasn't obvious to the rest of the world, but for her who'd known the young man ever since he was eleven years old it was indisputable.

A painful topic, indeed. Especially if one looked whose son Harry was, as well.

"I will have to inform Remus," Dumbledore said, all of a sudden. The fact he'd thought of it so late demonstrated how much this day's occurrences had thrown him off balance.

Remus Lupin.

The only true Marauder left.

One died, killed by You-Know-Who, but only since his supposedly best friend had told his master of their location (not even Minerva had known where they'd lived during the war out of reasons for security).

Another was killed by the traitor himself when he'd come to seek revenge ('Stupid boy... Foolish Peter Pettigrew').

Sirius Black had been brought to Azkaban the same day.

That remarkable, tight group of four friends, broken forever.

It was enough to bring tears to Minerva's eyes.

Many things had shocked her during the war, but never, not in a hundred years, had she believed it possible that Sirius Black would betray James Potter. Never.

She still had trouble believing it.

"Minerva, my dear? Are you alright?" Albus asked her softly touching her hand. Swiftly, she blinked away the tears.

"Yes, yes, Albus. I'm sorry, just lost in thought," she answered quickly.

"Imagine what kind of day Harry must go through when it bothers us so much."

Imagine that...

.-.-.-.-.-

As soon as Sister Augustine left with the little ones, the older kids looked at each other in silence.

"It's your decision, kid," Alex said. Harry could very well remember the last time she'd called him that: two days after their arrival at St Mary's. Ever since, he'd been Ry, someone to take care of the other kids along with her, not another person she had to feel responsible for.

To her, it had been a relief. To Harry, it had been the same as ever.

The fact she was calling him 'kid' meant therefore much more than either of them would ever be able to voice.

Karl looked at him... well, not indifferently, but for he was a Temporary the twelve-year-old simply wasn't involved the same way the others were and that knowledge was much more painful than knowing that the short, black-haired kid – who was presumably younger than he was but sometimes behaved as if he were twice his age – would leave.

Grey's blue eyes that usually reminded of a silent lake in the mountains seemed like the stormy sea. He bit into his lower lip, took a short breath and gulped.

"Promise, you'll keep in touch," he whispered. He was about a year older than Harry, he knew that much, but he'd never felt as if he was protecting him, more like the contrary.

"Grey..." Harry started shaking his head a little, but was interrupted.

"Promise!" Grey, or rather Gregory, but nobody expect for Sister Augustine called him that, "I know your promises, Harry, you always keep them. You once said to me you only gave them for things that are important to you." He wouldn't cry. He wouldn't! "Promise me you won't forget us. Promise..."

He spoke no more for Harry had grabbed his shoulders and those expressive emerald eyes that were covered by glasses displayed an odd mixture of determination, despair and disbelief. "Should I leave, I promise to keep in contact. I promise to look after you as well as I can from afar and if you truly believe there's the slightest chance I would forget you, then you are a fool." The last sentence was spoken with a smile; everything else had been said fiercely.

"I'll go... Look how Sara is," Grey said feeling a little embarrassed. He quickly turned around and left for the Common Room.

Harry and Char looked at each other and without saying a word for words weren't necessary they walked outside into the yard. Below the tree they stopped, but neither had the heart to sit down nor to

actually look at each other. When Char opened his mouth, Harry interrupted before he could voice a sound.

"Don't," the eleven-year-old murmured quietly for once sounding appropriately for his age, "Don't tell me to go. Of all people... Just don't."

"Won't" Char replied quietly, "But you should. Not caus'a me. If it were for me you wouldn't be capable of leavin' for I'd tie you to St Mary's. It ain't about us, though. You should go 'cause it's a chance and you know what they say 'bout chances... 'Take it, don't be..."

"...stupid enough ta leave it." They both smiled sadly.

"Harry Potter," the teenager said so suddenly, the underage wizard flinched, but relaxed instantly when he saw Char smile, "It fits, you know. You'll do just fine and so will I. And I'll take care a'them, together with Alex, Kai an' the Sister."

"Quit the..."

"Gutter Talk," Char finished for him and they both laughed. Impulsively, Harry stepped forward and they hugged each other briefly.

Finally, they sat down and started to talk about anything but the future.

.....

That's how Kertak found them, almost an hour later. Goblins couldn't disappear and reappear the way wand-carriers or house-elves could, however they could walk rather silently if they chose to do so and certain barriers like hedges simply moved when a goblin's magic worked.

He'd entered the yard through the hedge that separated St Mary's from the neighbourhood. Currently, he was hiding in the shadows of that very hedge he'd just overcome.

He hadn't told Harry he would come by, but he knew the child well enough to know that his enthusiasm to have been accepted to

Hogwarts (to be a real wizard) would soon be crushed when he truly understood what it meant to leave.

He'd felt anxious the entire day ever since he'd said goodbye to Harry. The worry had torn his innards not unlike a Niffler drilling its hole into the ground. To see him smile alongside his human friend gave him immediate peace.

"Join us, Kertak," Harry said softly. He didn't even look around. As always, the eleven-year-old simply knew where he was. Not for the first time he wondered just how exactly he did it. 'I think it's just instinct, Kertak' wasn't good enough an explanation for him.

Besides, 'join us?' Harry had invited him to meet his friends before, but he'd always declined. Why would he be dealing with non-magical folk? He didn't even enjoy dealing with the wand-carriers.

He would be a wand-carrier, too... Kertak wasn't sure whether this was good or bad, but he had faith in the little boy in front of him that he wouldn't become as the others. Therefore, he would support him with every fibre of his being.

Quietly, he sat down next to Harry, his eyes were hidden beneath the hood, but they surveyed the fourteen-year-old in front of him.

He couldn't remember the last time they'd spoken more than a short greeting. Harry on the other hand looked relaxed and happy to see them both sitting together, which was enough for him (and for the human it seemed) to at least try.

"How is it they started to call you 'Char'?" he asked at exactly the same time as Char asked, "What kinda weird name's 'Kertak'?"

Harry laughed heartedly at that, causing his friends to look at him. He was a very severe child, but when he laughed it was always true and untainted, a child's laughter. To make him laugh was a feat that was rewarded fully by that simple sound of the boy's voice that should come naturally from any kid but had to be provoked in the case of this one.

And so they started a lively conversation. Of course, Char didn't know what Kertak was, of course Kertak didn't quite know how to talk to a being for whom magic wasn't a natural part of life if not life

itself, but there was happiness and, although Harry hadn't left yet, it was a goodbye and introduction to something new. They would stay in contact, even after Harry's departure, if only to talk about the boy who'd brought them together today.

When Char walked inside to get some water for them, Kertak looked at his young friend saying solemnly, "I will look after them. Do not worry."

The answer was a grateful smile.

That's the second part of all in all three parts for the fourth chapter.

I hope you enjoyed it.

As always, a special thanks to MissGoalie75, my excellent Beta.

Then thanks to the 58 (!) people who've put me on story alert. That really made me smile.

Jubi no Ryu, Scandinavian Snapper, starlock, Oceanfur, MyBlueRose, Sekhmet49, Kila9Nishika and lovealwaysshopes: Thank you soooo much for reviewing. It really encouraged me to continue.

Please, read and review!

Chapter 4, Part Three: Caught in Between

Kertak was only gone for half an hour when Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall (in her Animagus form) arrived. They were led outside while Char stood up and left them alone.

The headmaster approached his future student with a smile. His eyes sparkled but were filled with understanding at the same time.

"There's no way I can take them along, is there?" the boy whispered, looking into space.

"No, I'm afraid there isn't, my boy," the old wizard replied kindly. He couldn't imagine what it had to be like for this earnest child to leave behind everything he knew to enter a world he'd seen before but never felt as if he was a part of it; an observer suddenly to become a participant and (though he was quite sure that Harry hadn't thought of that) a protector; an adult about to become a sheltered child.

"Tomorrow, Rubeus Hagrid, a trusted friend of mine, will go to Diagon Alley and if you still wish to have some company, you may go with him and buy your supplies for school."

"But," Harry interjected, "What about...?"

"I've asked at Gringotts and you may go there to identify yourself. They weren't willing to give me any information." This only spoke for the goblin's truthfulness. However, his tone seemed to alarm the young boy for he looked up.

"It is their duty to manage and protect the wealth of wizards and they take care of all worldly goods owned by magical beings. They take it very seriously, so they will not give away information to outsiders." The words were spoken solemnly and with quiet pride as if he was a goblin himself.

A very interesting young man, indeed.

"I didn't mean to insult your friends, Harry," Dumbledore replied in a soothing manner, "They acted justly and the Wizarding World should be much more grateful for the goblin's strict sense of honour."

That seemed to appease the young man for he nodded in agreement before he smiled carefully. He'd seen that smile many times now and the most powerful wizard of modern age wondered what it took to see a real smile from that earnest child.

"As for your question... I would very much like to be accompanied by Mr Hagrid."

That almost made the headmaster laugh.

Mr Hagrid.

He couldn't remember the last time anyone had called Rubeus 'Mr Hagrid.' He had a feeling that Harry very soon would stop saying so as well and that there was a new friendship in the making. Rubeus was child enough while Harry was adult enough for them to understand each other well.

"Sir..." Emerald eyes hidden behind glasses met blue ones that were behind half-moon shaped spectacles. "May I ask you a question? It concerns my family." It wasn't fair that this small boy only looked like a child when he was feeling vulnerable. Albus Dumbledore hoped that some time in Hogwarts would be able to change that.

"Anytime, my boy."

"My aunt and my cousin, Aunt Tuney and Duddy... I mean, Petunia and Dudley. How'd they die? There was a fire, but what happened?"

"There was a gas leak in your aunt's house and the gas caught fire causing an explosion... Harry?" He looked absolutely rigid. His fingers were curled into fists and he was breathing heavily.

"That smell... Something was wrong, but it was too late... The fire came, it encircled me and then I was gone. Suddenly, I was all alone..." Tears caused those remarkable eyes to moisten but they would not fall. "I was in there... Why am I still alive?" His voice was rough as if he'd screamed for hours.

"Harry, I can only speculate, but I believe that it was your magical core that saved you. You see, when we are young, the magical core causes small bursts of accidental magic when we feel scared or

angry. When our magical core feels threatened, it flares a lot more potently than it usually does in order to protect itself... and therefore yourself."

That was odd. How come his core never flared when he or his friends were being hurt? That didn't make sense.

Besides, whatever little magic he possessed, it was never activated unconsciously. Sure, some of his defensive movements in moments of an attack or when he ran was performed purely out of reflex. But ever since he knew of the magical world, the little things he did thanks to magic such as soothing pain he had to do consciously.

That was confirmation to what he'd always thought. He didn't have much power (nor did he want that. He simply wanted enough to protect his family) for he had to do consciously what others were able to do purely due to emotion. Hogwarts would definitely be tough if his peers were capable of so much.

His thoughts were interrupted by sorrow when he thought of his aunt and cousin.

'I'm so sorry, Aunt Tuney. I hope you're happy wherever you are. Duddy, you'll always be like a brother, no matter for how short the time was we were allowed to spend together. I would've loved to introduce Kertak and Char to you, my brothers of choice and Sara as well as Luke and Grey, younger siblings I know you would have helped protect.'

He blinked a little and for a moment the wish to see the family he never knew, his parents and aunt and cousin, was so overwhelming he couldn't really breathe. He longed to see them, or at least their graves and if only to make sure that once upon a time, they had been real. But the man in front of him had given too much time already; he certainly wouldn't have the audacity of asking him whether he'd bring him to his family's graves.

"What'd they look like?" He had to be really tired if he himself started to speak in Gutter Talk.

Instead of answering, the tall man put a hand in his pocket seemingly searching. A rush of warmth overcame Harry, the way it sometimes did when wizards appeared out of thin air ('Apparation'

Kertak had said it was called) or when Kertak tried to sneak up on him. However, this was tenfold to what he usually felt and Harry was quite sure that whatever magic the man in front of him used, it was very powerful.

Albus Dumbledore was powerful, but he chose not to show it or use it left with another choice. Harry's respect for the man he hardly knew deepened.

Power was to have it, but not to use it. It seemed as if the bearded man knew this.

When the wizard extracted his hand, there was a picture carefully grasped in his hand.

"I was given this picture right after you were born, Harry. It is yours now. You were their greatest treasure."

When Harry looked at the picture, he was unable to hold back that stubborn tear which had been eager to fall for so long.

Here they were.

His mother had dark red hair and, as the headmaster had told him, green eyes looking like his own by shape and colour. She was beautiful. In her arms was a baby and she looked at it so full of love it pained Harry.

This, he had missed. All those years, he'd missed that without ever knowing what it was.

The unconditional love of a mother and a father... For James Potter was kneeling beside his wife making funny faces for his son who definitely hadn't reached yet the age to laugh... It made Harry smile for it showed a lot about what kind of character James Potter was.

A good-humoured man who'd hardly been ready to wait for his son to grow up so he could go outside and play with him (while at the same time, he wanted him to stay a baby).

Yes, James Potter definitely looked like the kind of man who would've loved to play outside with his son. This meant a lot to Harry who'd always preferred being outside to being inside (as long as he

was able to find shelter in a cold winter night). His father was a tall, thin man with glasses (so, his poor eye-sight came from somewhere) and untidy black hair.

His mother reached down and kissed her son before she kissed her husband's forehead softly. There was a smile of utter happiness mixed with a cheerful eye roll. So, she'd been the rational one, well aware of her partner's mischievous ways. She'd been the voice of reason, but at the same time accepted him for everything he was.

Looking at his father it was clear that the man had worshiped the ground his mother walked on.

At least, they were together now.

Of course, he couldn't be sure whether his assumptions were correct. It was one picture taken on a happy day. Nevertheless, they'd been good people and that was something to be proud of.

Harry smiled.

And tears fell freely from his face.

"There, there, my boy," he heard Professor Dumbledore's voice as if from far away and so full of understanding, Harry had to refrain not to embrace the other man, but that was an act of impertinence he was not ready to display, not towards the headmaster of his school.

His school.

Hogwarts. He would be able to go to Hogwarts.

Leaving his friends behind.

All of a sudden, he understood the expression of "living through an emotional rollercoaster" so much better. The entire day, its ups and downs, crushed down on him like an avalanche falling from the mountains. He breathed in and out in order to get a hold of himself.

For a moment, he was merely calm before exhaustion overcame him and he yawned.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said immediately, blushing as he put his hand on his mouth.

"Completely understandable, Harry. You had a strenuous day and should get some rest. It is late after all. I am very glad that you will come to Hogwarts..." He halted realizing that Harry really hadn't said that just yet.

"Yes, sir. My decision is final. I will come to Hogwarts." He was unable to keep all sadness out his voice or eyes, but he was glad to see that it didn't insult the old wizard's feelings.

"You may contact me whenever questions arise, though I must say that you seem to know quite a bit thanks to your goblin friend. Rubeus will pick you up tomorrow. Unless you wish to see me again, we will meet each other on your first evening at Hogwarts."

"Thank you very much for giving me so much of your time, sir," Harry replied solemnly. Then, he smiled. "Goodbye and farewell, Professor Dumbledore."

"Goodbye, Harry." The boy nodded and to Dumbledore's great surprise, he walked over to Minerva.

He sat down next to her and whispered, "I hope your hip's a little better, lady. Goodbye." With that he caressed her head and walked them back into the house and out of the front door.

He waved and Dumbledore waved back.

He was looking forward to seeing that child again. Hogwarts would have to shelter yet another orphan. This one was special, as had been another more than fifty years ago. However, though he could see some similarities, he was also capable of noticing the differences.

He saw them again when he looked back once more, only to see that young Richard had laid a hand on the boy's shoulder who smiled in return.

Very short, I know. However, the fourth chapter is finished.

Thanks for your support!

The fifth chapter is almost completely written and the first part is sent to my Beta, so the next update should come soon.

Next Chapter: Welcome Back To Diagon Alley

Back to Diagon Alley

He dreaded going to bed that night for he was well aware whom he shared the room with. When he entered quietly, it didn't surprise him that their mattresses were placed next to each other, much closer than usual.

Sara was the only one who noticed him when he tried not to be seen or heard. She'd been able to do so for quite a while. It was an instinct that was reciprocated. He would have to ask Kertak whether there was the slightest chance that she was magical. His friend would know for he was much more attuned to magic than he was.

He wasn't surprised when he saw that there were two forms sitting on his bed. Even in the almost complete darkness he saw the smaller form swaying a little as if falling asleep every second.

"Hey, kids," he whispered affectionately.

Both stood up immediately, ran over and embraced him.

Luke was two years younger than he was, but he was almost as tall as him. He closed his eyes as soon as Sara's little body was secured in his arms.

"Sorry for upsetting you," the girl whispered, causing Harry to take a step back.

"You didn't..."

"You should go... to that place," she continued as if not hearing what he said, "We'll find a way, we always do, don't we?" Tears were falling from her face when she looked up. Then, she softly laid her right hand on his chest and said, "Remember that terrible winter night when I got lost and nobody was able to find me but you? Remember what you said? 'I'll always find you, Sara. As long as my heart is...'"

"Still beating, I'll find you, little one. For I'm your brother and protecting you is part of the job description." She laughed and cried while he swallowed heavily. "I'll be there for you, little one, no matter how far away I'll be."

"Tell me a story."

Harry smiled and the all three of them sat down. "Sure, what do you want to hear?" he asked kindly.

"Fly, Little Fledgling, Fly." Harry smiled. Small children loved fairytales, which was why he'd asked Kertak whether it was okay to tell his small friends some of the stories he'd been told. Kertak had hesitated at first, but then realized that to the kids it would be nothing but a story. That the magical creatures actually existed, they would never know.

"This is the story of Gaio, the little Hippogriff who simply wouldn't fly.' You see, hippogriffs lived a long time ago and they were magical creatures with the head of a giant eagle and the body of a horse. They were very proud and were children of the sky." And so he told the story with slight alterations to Kertak's version.

It didn't take long and Sara fell asleep. Luke followed her into the land of dreams shortly after.

He put them both to bed and lied down on his mattress. Before his head hit the small pillow, he was already asleep.

No matter how tired he was he got up as usual. It was half-past five in the morning when he quietly left the chamber and snuck down in order to prepare for the day. He went into the cellar to get the dry laundry from the day before and started to fold it. Then, as quietly as possible, he went upstairs and put in front of each chamber the clothing of its inhabitants. After that, he went into the kitchen and started to prepare breakfast. They wouldn't get up before seven, which was why he didn't cook any bacon just yet. Sausages were served exclusively on Sundays.

He looked at the prepared table and noticed that the only thing missing was bread. The moment he thought about it, the characteristic sound of a key being put into a lock was heard.

He walked towards the entrance with a smile.

"Good morning, Sister Margret."

She startled. "Dear Goodness, child! Do not move so quietly or you will cause my death one of these days," she chastised him, but her eyes softened as soon as her heartbeat calmed down somewhat.

"Don't tell me, everything is already prepared. Again..."

"Well, not everything..."

She sighed, crouched down only forced to moan a little due to arthritis in her hips and softly caressed his cheek.

"You are a good child, Harry, but you have to learn that not everything is in your responsibility," she stated quietly, "I'm glad you will finally be able to learn that lesson when you go to that school." She smiled when she saw him startle.

"Sister Augustine and I have decided not to interfere for it was clearly something that had to be discussed amongst you children. Adults most likely would have made the situation worse. That doesn't mean we have been deaf and blind yesterday."

That was what Harry liked about the Sisters. Although they sheltered them, they trusted them to make their own decisions and only interfered when there was actual danger. They understood the dynamics of orphaned children as well as they knew each individual's character. Harry had seen enough orphanages to know that this wasn't the case in the majority of them.

"What day is your departure?" A question undoubtedly asked a hundred times before, but it looked as if the pain over it never lessened.

"I'll come back, you know," he said to make that clear, "September first."

She nodded, but didn't say anything.

They were quiet for a moment until Sister Margret spoke up. "Come, help be get in the supplies."

And together they brought in bread, fresh vegetables and fruits. Harry looked at the pitiful ration of fruits and vegetables and frowned at her.

"It rained a lot this spring and summer," she explained, unable to keep the shame out of her voice when she continued, "Healthy food has gotten expensive."

It angered the underage wizard. Of course, this wasn't the Sister's fault, but he'd seen too many kids who started to eat 'junk' simply because everything else was too pricy. It wasn't fair.

"A friend of Professor Dumbledore will be joining me to the Centre in order to help me get my stuff for school. He'll be coming by this morning." He hadn't had the opportunity to tell this yet, which was why he said it as long as mayhem hadn't ensued the way it did every morning when breakfast was on the table and the rest of the children awake.

"Very well," Sister Margret said.

Harry helped her a bit, but as always she sent him away to 'relax a little.'

The hour before an average day began at Mary's Orphanage was the one hour that Harry had to himself (apart from the times he met with Kertak). He spent it in the garden whether it rained, snowed or when he was able to count the stars in the sky. He loved the sun, but the night was full of mysteries allowing him to hide from the world. It wasn't always without danger, but here, he felt safe.

He sat down beneath the tree and leaned on it closing his eyes. He was looking forward to seeing Diagon Alley again. It had been too long. But he was also nervous. For the first time, he wouldn't be a spectator but would have to interact with people. Usually, he'd merely met with Kertak and some of his kin, apart from Tom there were very few humans whom he was used to talking to.

He heard a light, scratching tone of something moving within the wood and smiled.

"Good morning, Truckle, already awake?" Truckle didn't show itself, but Harry knew it was there. He'd called it Truckle for Kertak had told him that it was a Bowtruckle, a tree-guardian. The creature was insanely shy, but Harry had dealt with shy beings all his life, which was why he could spot it every once in a while for he brought the

necessary calm and patience to lure it out. What also helped was that he, too, liked this tree and regarded it as the yard's centre. He always told the others not to damage it when they were playing in the yard. A day after he'd first said it (about a week after his arrival), Truckle had showed its brown eyes for the first time. He'd been so surprised that he'd nearly fallen over.

More than four weeks after that, he saw it a second time. These days, he saw it more or less once a week. He always talked to it and the creature seemed to listen.

Sometimes.

Harry noticed that a flower next to him had started to wither. He carefully laid his hand over it and focused. He remembered sunlight touching his skin and tried to transfer that warmth into the flower.

It bloomed a moment later and Harry smiled wistfully. If only saving people was that simple...

He looked around and noticed that, although sunrise was approaching, it was still rather dark. At that, he focused on the flower once again. If he looked really hard he was able to see what he wanted... He focused on the changes necessary, imaged the picture he'd once seen in 'Frogs, Toads and other Amphibians indigenous to Europe'...A moment later, a small toad with a red belly jumped into the hand he'd used to cover the flower.

And his peers at Hogwarts were able to do this? Without having to focus, at all? Remarkable. It took all of his focus to keep up the transformation.

For he didn't want to drain himself, he placed the toad back where it came from and waved his hand away, causing the toad to turn back into a flower.

Daylight approached and he didn't dare to try anything else. Instead, he reached into his pocket and looked at his parents' picture again.

They'd seemed so happy, no idea that they wouldn't be able to celebrate their son's second birthday...

Before he could dwell on it for too long, he heard St Mary's Orphanage waking up.

Breakfast was much more fun than Harry had feared. Sara still looked sad, as were some of the little ones, but most of them were supportive. Gabriel didn't seem to be very hungry at first, but when he saw his protector chat so happily with Char, Alexandra and Sara, he couldn't bring himself to oppose to Harry's departure.

He'd miss him, however.

They were almost finished when the doorbell rang. Before Harry could say that it was for him, Christopher and Gabriel already rushed in order to open the door.

Harry had merely stood up by the time he heard the door open.

What followed was a terrified scream.

The underage wizard was at the door by the time Alexandra had managed to stand up.

In the doorway stood the largest man Harry had ever seen. He was quite sure that this man wouldn't fit through the doorway. His face wore a long, shaggy mane of black hair and a wild, tangled beard. His black eyes displayed kindness and good humour. Right now, he seemed utterly bewildered and ashamed.

He kneeled down seemingly with the intention of looking less terrifying, but utterly failed for he was still twice as tall as Sister Augustine and about eight times as wide. He looked pained as if there was no bigger crime than scaring small (or in the man's case, tiny) children.

Harry stepped forward and smiled. "Mr Hagrid, I assume?"

The black beetles that were his eyes caught Harry's gaze and they widened. "Yeh're real. Of course, Dumbledore is never wrong, but when he said... Yeh look like them. Saw yeh last when yeh was a baby."

The 'Quit the Gutter Talk' was on the tip of his tongue, although it sounded different. Mr Hagrid spoke in a Scottish accent, which

sounded different from the slang they used on the streets, but it was close enough. It made Harry feel at home.

"Thank you for picking me up, sir."

This caused the gigantic man to chuckle. "No 'sir', Harry. Just call me Hagrid. Everyone does. Leave the formalities ter more importan' people."

Harry smiled. He'd definitely like this man. The large wizard reached into his pockets, some of which seemed to be alive somehow, and extracted a pocket-watch.

"Gallopin' Gorons. We've got ter go," then he looked at the group of children who regarded him wide-eyed, "...er..."

Harry looked back and saw the fear in their eyes. "May I introduce you? Everyone, this is Rubeus Hagrid, he will help me buy my stuff for school. Hagrid, these are... my fr... bro...sis... That crazy little bunch of people is my family." How on earth was he to explain their relationship to an outsider? But, his explanations seemed to be enough for the beard curled into an even wider smile.

"Nice ta meetcha, Hagrid," Char said, winking at Harry who shook his head with a smirking eye-roll.

"Back at yeh," was the good-humoured reply, "Let's go."

Harry looked down at his clean but rather ragged clothes. He'd never entered Diagon Alley as anything else but an observer and occasionally a beggar. He wasn't used to being a customer. Would his attire be accepted? These were his best clothes; he'd put them on purposely.

When he looked at Hagrid, he saw him smile kindly, "Don' worry. Yeh look just fine."

With that and a goodbye, they left St Mary's orphanage.

"So, Professor Dumbledore told me yeh been to Diagon Alley before. What's the fastest way?"

Harry had to think first. He usually walked there, but that nearly took three hours from St Mary's orphanage, which was one of the reasons why his visits to Diagon Alley had subsided for he'd lived nearby before.

Hesitating a little, he gave directions. An hour later, they entered London's centre and although some of his worst memories were created not far from here, he couldn't help but smile.

Home again!

St Mary's sheltered his family and he loved the house, but the streets of London's city were where he came from and his heart would always be attached to it. As soon as they entered his old hunting ground, he relaxed. It didn't matter for how long he was away, he was always welcomed back.

Hagrid asked him whether he knew this part of London well and Harry had simply been able to nod. This question he couldn't possibly be answered properly.

His eyes surveyed the 'old place.'

He wondered, not for the first time, if the busy crowd saw the world he came from or they were as oblivious as they sometimes seemed. When he saw that nine-year-old pickpocket reach into that rich lady's purse to steal her money while she looked into a shop window, he knew that they didn't.

Some did, though. The foreboding feeling of Coppers nearby overcame him and he whirled around only to see nobody else than Micah Cline. His eyes narrowed, anger coursed through him.

"Hagrid," he said forcing himself to sound happy instead of angry, "I just saw an old friend of mine. Why don't we meet in the Leaky Cauldron? Don't worry, I know this place better than most."

Very reluctantly, Hagrid complied. Tom's pub was merely a hundred yards from here, but he really didn't want to leave that child alone. On the other hand, ever since they'd crossed some sort of invisible line, Harry had grown much more confident, as if entering his personal territory.

"Don' want ter bother yer meeting, but here," he handed him what seemed like a roughly worked piece of wood, "It's a whistle. If yeh're in trouble, just blow and I'll be there."

For a moment, Harry couldn't speak. Time was urgent, but such a blatant offer for protection was rarely given, especially from an adult (adult human, at least, Natruk had been less blunt but about as straight-forward).

"Thanks," was all he could say.

Right after Hagrid had disappeared in the crowd (or at least, walked away for the man was too large to be unseen), Harry's eyes resumed to the young burglar. He wasn't experienced, Harry could tell, for the kid was reckless enough to remain and to steal another purse.

It was a stupid move for one successful theft was difficult enough, a second one unseen was nearly impossible.

Cline discovered the young thief. Harry's eyes widened. He quickly moved through the crowd, like a ghost, until he was beside the younger kid.

"Run! The Coppers are comin'" He whispered into the boy's ear whose owner flinched and stared at him. There were no questions needed.

The kid ran.

"Stop!" Harry heard Cline call. He looked after the burglar and it didn't take him long to see that he wasn't fast enough.

'You won't get that one, Cline,' he thought angrily and moved into the alley to his left.

He hadn't lied to Hagrid.

He knew the place better than anyone else, but he also knew some tricks. This particular alley had a dead-end. At least to those who didn't bother to look.

He quickly moved to the brick-stoned wall and pushed. The bricks moved aside and Harry entered another alley. Only this one possessed what he needed: a staircase leading to the roof. He climbed up quickly and was glad to notice that the much calmer life at St Mary's hadn't taken away much of his fitness. Once having reached the roof, he looked down and saw that Cline nearly caught up on the nameless kid for he was constantly approaching while the child was falling back.

Harry raced over the flat rooftop and jumped landing safely on the lowest point of the sloping roof belonging to the next house. He quietly ran across the uneven ground, nearly losing balance when one of the shingles stuck out and his foot barely managed to avoid it. This time he jumped, landing securely on the ground. While the others had to work themselves through the crowd he could avoid it merely by using abandoned alleys.

He rushed into the alley straight ahead of him. If he passed that without losing much time, he'd be able to hide the kid before Cline got to him. But there was a stonewall and they didn't move as willingly as the bricks.

"Please!" He whispered, "Please, work!" While he was running straight at the stonewall, he lifted his hand and drew one of the runes Kertak had showed him: transparency.

Either he'd crush into the wall and the kid would be caught or... He stumbled into the next alley nearly using balance.

"In here!" he hissed when the child he was trying to help rushed across the lane he'd used as escape -route.

He was glad to see that the kid recognized him to be the person that had warned him for he obeyed immediately.

"Trashcan," he ordered while opening it. The young burglar didn't ask, he simply jumped right in.

The moment the can was closed, Cline arrived.

"Got you! I... Harry?" The underage wizard's heart grew cold. There were few people whom he hated, but Micah Cline was one of them.

"I... How... Where is... I..." Why was he stuttering like this? It irritated Harry even more. He should have enough backbone to face his mistakes.

"Long time no see, Micah." Few of those who knew him would believe that he was capable of speaking so venomously. His emerald eyes for once looked like green pieces of icicles glimmering darkly in the dusky light of the alley.

"Where...?"

Harry laughed coldly, a sound that shouldn't come from a kid his age, "You're more of a fool than I thought. If you believe that I'll tell you that." Cline walked towards the trashcan, but Harry stepped in between.

"Don't." He didn't want to hurt people, not even that man, but he'd do it without hesitation if necessary.

"I'm still a cop, Harry," Cline warned, but he hardly bore looking into the accusing face of the boy, "Threatening me isn't a good idea."

"Eleven-year-olds generally don't tend to threaten Coppers much. I'm unarmed, after all."

Cline took another step and Harry tensed. This wouldn't end well if he didn't stop this right now.

"You owe me," he hissed coldly, "You owe them! Four years, Cline! You didn't check in on us, not once! But you kept bringing them, didn't you. To the gate, but no further, right? We were kids, Cline, not criminals to be put behind bars. You could've checked." The last sentence was whispered, but Cline flinched as if he'd screamed.

"I..." It didn't touch Harry that his voice cracked. But it wasn't as satisfying as he'd expected, "Forgive me, I know I failed you, all of you. I'm sorry."

"Forgive you? When hell freezes over, maybe. Oh no, wait. You see, hell does freeze over and it's dark and cold. You try to warm up, but you just can't stop your body from shivering. Hell's fire and ice, it either burns you or freezes you, but You... Just... Can't... Get... Warm!" He felt the bricks of the wall crack and breathed out for he

didn't want destroy anything, not even that person who'd subjected him to hell.

"Get outta here! Just... go! Catch the real criminals, not some kids who want to get their food," he said turning away.

He heard Cline walk away, but then the steps were heard no longer.

"I'm always checking now, always. I just wanted you to have the chance to find a family. But I failed you and for that I'll always be sorry." The words were a mere whisper and Harry closed his eyes in a desperate attempt to get rid off the emotions that threatened to drown him.

"Good," was all he could say. He'd hated the man for four years. To know he'd changed was good, but he wasn't ready to let go off his righteous anger just yet. Maybe, he hadn't known, but he sure as hell hadn't cared what happened to them, either.

"You been to Hell?" The kid asked while he descended the trash can, after he'd made sure that the Copper was gone.

Harry merely nodded.

"That was one stupid move," Harry chastised the boy, "Never steal twice at the same place!"

The boy ducked his head, "Sorry."

The eleven-year-old softened at the sight of the miserable kid. "It's okay. Just don't repeat it. Look, I've got to go. Bye! Take care of yourself."

"Bye."

Harry hurried back. He didn't want Hagrid to wait for him.

There it was, that tiny pub called the Leaky Cauldron. He'd never entered Diagon Alley through the pub and felt sudden apprehension. He was looking forward to seeing Tom again, but everybody else...

Quietly, he entered the pub and surveyed the dark, shabby however clean place. It was a bit crowded today and Harry was glad about it

for people tended to be a lot less observant when many people surrounded them.

He recognized Hagrid rather quickly, but that wasn't particularly hard. He was answering questions some of the customers asked him, but mainly he talked to Tom.

Hesitantly, Harry approached them.

Tom was the one who saw him first and he brightened at the sight of him. He opened his mouth to say something, but Hagrid interrupted.

"Harry, this is Tom, the owner of the place. Tom, this is Harry Potter, James' and Lily's son," Hagrid introduced them.

"We've met," Harry said quietly and looked at Tom apprehensively. The almost bald wizard displayed an honest surprise before he confirmed Harry's statement without giving anything away. When they left the pub, Hagrid asked him how they'd gotten to know each other.

"He used to help me out when I came here." Harry was a bit evasive, but that was understandable, Hagrid thought. He too, had his secrets and it would be wrong to pry, "I'll pay him back as soon as I'm able."

They entered the magical alley. No matter how many times he'd watched it or had walked through it in the company of Kertak, it was still fantastic to see the place.

His heart rate started to increase since everything would be different starting today, he realized when they approached Gringotts' main entrance.

He stopped dead.

"Harry, are yeh alrigh'? Thought yeh knew Gringotts. Dumbledore alluded ter somethin'. Trouble with the goblins?" He sounded very worried when he asked the last question.

"No, no," Harry replied immediately, "Kertak is my friend and I like Natruk, no, that's not it. It's just... The main entrance is for..."

He nearly laughed, when he realized he'd nearly said 'wand-carriers'. He was one, too!

"I usually entered it sideways, along with Kertak. I've never been in the Tosa Lei... The vast hall for the customers," he explained when he saw Hagrid looking a bit confused.

Hagrid smiled at him, "Yeh're one of a kind, aren't yeh? Come, and don' worry."

Together, they walked upstairs. The goblin (he didn't know him) in the entrance bowed formally. It included 'welcome', 'honourable' and 'customer'. Harry bowed in return displaying 'greetings', 'honourable' and 'guard'. He wasn't very professional with the bows yet which was why he spoke additionally, "Rukaikan, trac kandril. dàio." The 'thank you' he added for he'd been welcomed into a goblin's house.

Surprised, the guard looked at him and added another bowing form he didn't know. He was almost forced to ask when the goblin smiled a little, "saràn y kra."

Ah, 'goblin-friend.' He wasn't often called this, it was a term reserved for respected... and here it was again... 'wand-carrier' was on the top of his mind.

Harry bowed, wishing him a good day and they entered. For the first time, the underage wizard saw the famous warning:

Enter, stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sin of greed,

For those who take, but do not earn,

Must pay most dearly in their turn,

So if you seek beneath our floors

A treasure that was never yours,

Thief, you have been warned, beware,

Of finding more than treasure there.

Meanwhile, Hagrid looked at Harry in awe. They passed a pair of goblins who were quite startled when Harry greeted them with a bow.

"I should let yeh talk, I guess," His beard curled into a smile, "I sometimes believe they see me a big oaf. I'm a little..." He was looking down at his large hands, "... I guess they don't like my manners much."

Harry looked up at Hagrid. He didn't want the man to feel bad. He was a good person and it had to be hard to never have completed his education (Hagrid had told him that he'd been expelled without going into details).

He knew what it was like to watch the magical community without feeling yourself to be magical enough to belong to it.

"Goblins respect those who try, Hagrid," he said as they approached the Vanric Kandril, the Honourable Counsellor. One of the highest positions a goblin was able to obtain in Gringotts' main seat in London. Harry didn't know much about goblin's hierarchy, but that much he knew. Only the smartest and magically strongest amongst 'common kin' were allowed to directly deal with wizards' money by counselling the customers. The Vanric Kandril was the most important consultant of them all. He was known to have a brilliant mind, which was necessary since it was his job to coordinate everything that occurred in Tosa Lei. The rest of the counsellors were called Vanrica. "You don't have to be perfectly polite, simply show that you respect them, in your way."

Harry looked around. About a hundred goblins were working here, some of them were called Meràs ('truth') and it was their job to certificate whether the jewellery and precious stones, paintings and ancient documents were authentic or not, others Harry recognized to be apprentices to either the Meràs or the Vanrica. The Vanrica's offices were behind the countless doors where they were helping the Wizarding World safe and invest their worldly goods.

Harry had never personally met Vanric Kandril, but to see what he had to do filled him with greatest respect for the goblin sitting behind a large desk. Hagrid walked straight at his desk before Harry could protest.

It would be very impolite to approach Vanric Kandril as long as several Vanrica were free.

"Hagrid, just ask him which Vanrica would be suitable for our business, then you state it." Hagrid looked at him rather puzzled, but he obliged.

They halted in front of the desk.

Hagrid bowed a little clumsily, but it was heartfelt and honest since he truly respected the goblins (was wary of them, even). "Hello... er... We've come ter 'unfreeze' the Potter vaults since ... Well, Harry Potter is still alive. And I was sent by Professor Dumbledore ter claim the content of another vault... May I ask which 'vatica' would be suitable for our business?" Harry had to suppress a laugh. Hagrid had just asked which goat was suitable for their business. But he'd tried and that was all one could ask for. Apparently, the Vanric Kandril thought so as well for he smiled.

"May I see Headmaster Dumbledore's letter?" Hagrid handed it over and it was read very carefully.

"That seems to be in order. Griphook will show you to your vault, sir, while I take care of the identification of Mr Potter and, should it be confirmed, ordering access to his vaults. Griphook." Harry was so stunned, he hardly had time to greet Griphook whom he'd met once or twice. A very earnest but good-hearted goblin who was easy to talk to.

"Please, follow me, Mr Potter," Vanric Kandril said and led them to a small-looking door right behind his desk.

Harry bowed a little for he didn't trust his own words.

When he entered, it surprised him deeply to see Natruk sitting behind a desk apparently writing a letter. He looked up and smiled immediately when he saw the child enter. Harry quickly walked to the generous goblin whom he regarded as somewhat an uncle.

"Natruk!" Due to his lack of height, he wasn't forced to crouch down too much, but could simply embrace the goblin who returned the gesture. "How are you, sir?" Although their actions spoke of

friendship, Harry had always spoken rather respectfully with Natruk for Kertak had always shown deep respect for his elder.

"Fine, Harry. And Kertak told me that you have been invited to Hogwarts. That is very good. May I know why you're here?"

Vanric Kandril seemed taken aback for a moment, but then he explained that they were here to verify Mr Potter's identity. Kertak nodded, "I will get the necessary supplies immediately, leica." Only a minute later he arrived with a small bowl that was covered in Runes, half of which Harry had never seen in his life.

Natruk handed his apparent master (Harry had no idea that Natruk was so highly positioned) a small knife, its handle carried two runes, but Harry didn't recognize them either. Then, Natruk drew a circle on the ground and wrote 'Potter' three times in the Rune alphabet right outside the line. Meanwhile, Vanric Kandril got what seemed to be a personal document and drew several symbols inside and outside of the circle.

When they were finished, the Honourable Counsellor asked him to step inside, to take the knife and to cut into his left thumb. The blood should fall into the bowl and if it started to glow, he was a 'Potter', if it didn't, he wasn't.

Harry was very nervous when he did as he was told. What if he wasn't Harry Potter after all? Despite what had been said. What if...

But all 'what if's were in vain for the bowl glistened white and Harry laughed happily. He truly was Harry Potter.

Natruk laid a hand on his shoulder, which resulted in yet another embrace by the underage wizard.

He let go of the goblin when he heard Vanric Kandril clearing his throat. He was asked to sit down and Natruk's master explained, "Mr Potter, you are the only heir of the Potter heirloom which consists of the Potter Mansion and Godric's Hollow though the latter has been destroyed ten years ago. Also, you are in possession of several goods, paintings and jewellery that are all placed in one of the three safety vaults at Gringotts. Without a proper guardian, you will not be allowed to access any of them before you turn seventeen. However, there is the fourth vault that belonged to your parents personally,

and after their death you inherited it. It is now at your disposal. Your aunt would have had access, but she never used it. When you were proclaimed dead all vaults were frozen and nobody had access to them. The steward of the Potter Mansion is a very trusted employee of Gringotts, Terkin. Of course, you may meet him and apply your wishes, but before you turn of age you are not allowed to move in without a guardian."

"I trust Terkin to know what he's doing. I have one wish, though. Should there be house-elves... I have no wish to keep a slave," Kertak had always tried to avoid that rather dark topic of the Wizarding Community, but Harry had of course heard about it. He detested slavery and would never approve of it. He knew what it was like when your life wasn't quite your own. Absently, he rubbed his left wrist, which was covered by a watch, one of the few possessions he had.

Natruk smiled at him.

"As far as I know," the counsellor said, "Your father has already freed them, but they have decided to stay with your family." He looked at his notes and raised his eyebrows, "Apparently, there's quite a story behind it." He handed the note to Natruk who read it and stifled an amused laughter.

"Natruk?"

"Well, your father has freed them when he was a child, by accident. He'd wanted to play with them and that somehow included the part where they'd been obliged to wear late Mr Potter's, your grandfather's, violet cloak. He was ten, by the time, and nobody was able to tell whether he did it on purpose or not..." Harry smiled fondly.

Then he looked up, suddenly stricken with what he'd been told. He owned a mansion and four vaults at Gringotts? That he could access only one of them wasn't an issue.

"Is it allowed to donate money to non-magical humans?" he suddenly asked Natruk's master. If he already possessed money, his family should get some of it.

"Yes, of course. The gold will be changed into any currency you ask."

"Then, how much can I donate from the vault I have access to without risking to expire it before I'm of age?"

"That entirely depends on your expenses..."

Harry did some quick thinking. He didn't know how much he'd have to spend for Hogwarts, but he'd need some fresh clothing in about a year which he would buy in second-hand shops, food shouldn't be a problem at school, maybe some additional reading...

"What an average student spends for seven years at Hogwarts plus... I don't know... a thousand pounds a year?"

The Honourable Counsellor looked at him, "And everything else you want to donate?"

"Well, yes. If there's anything left."

"Left would be about fifteen thousand Galleons per annum."

Harry's eyes widened. That was quite a bit of money.

"What's the current exchange rate?"

"One Galleon is currently worth five pounds."

Oh. Well...

He possessed a fortune. It was hard to put your mind around that idea, especially if you remembered every day your stomach had growled these past eleven years.

"I'd like to donate some money to St Mary's orphanage," he said before he got lost in his thoughts completely.

"How much have you had in mind?" Vanric Kandril (at that point, he realized that he still didn't know his name) asked not questioning his decision.

"Enough, so they have enough food, can buy some new clothing and do some repairs..." Harry started unsurely, but Natruk interrupted.

"Child, don't worry. I will take care of it, personally. Your vault will not be emptied, but they will receive what is needed. Let me do the calculations, please."

Harry immediately agreed. He trusted Natruk to do what was right.

"Thank you. For now, I think it'd be best if you would be seen to your vault, so you can get some money, but should you have any questions, you may contact me directly or through Kertak."

Sometime later, Harry was back in the marble hall, his bag full of wizard money. He caught up with Hagrid who had acquired what Professor Dumbledore wanted and who'd recovered from his ride on the rattling cart. They were chatting when Harry suddenly felt something solid connect with his feet. A bucket filled with cleaning devices was knocked over in the process. The old goblin who had been kneeling on the ground cleaning the floor with a brush looked at him wide-eyed.

"I'm so sorry," Harry said, immediately got down on his knees and helped picking up the brushes and cloths that had been spreading the floor, "I didn't watch where I was going." His mind had been elsewhere which wasn't very fair to the janitor.

"Hush, young one," the rough voice of the old goblin was rather deep. He sounded like a great storyteller, "No need to rush. Thank you for helping me... 'tis rare to have a human join me on the ground."

Harry smiled at that. "Well, I guess most people are not clumsy enough to run over your things..."

"More than you'd think." It didn't sound wistful. Just sad.

"Don't be bothered with people's blindness. They tend to oversee what's right in front of them." He was a kid of the streets. He knew what it was like.

"Someone might be able to teach them," the old goblin replied, "I am Shihdinî, but you may call me Péosh." Sometimes, they did that, the goblins. They first gave away their position in goblin's community before they said their names. However, he'd never heard the title Shidinî before.

"Nice to meet you," he said bowing a little indicating what he'd said, "My name's Harry..." He wanted to give his full name but stopped when he felt someone approach from behind. He tensed up getting ready to fight if necessary. His instincts warned him rarely so blatantly.

Suddenly, a booted foot knocked the old, humped goblin over. Harry caught him before he fell face-over on the ground.

"Well, well, well," a sneering voice whispered, "These floors should be taken care of much more carefully. There's so much filth on it and we wouldn't want to put the entire goblin race to shame by having stale Gringotts Headquarters, now, would we? It would be very embarrassing for the entire Magical World of Great Britain."

Harry looked up, his eyes narrowed in barely suppressed anger. In front of them stood a tall man (though next to Hagrid who clearly looked disgusted, he seemed rather small), had a pale, pointed face and cold, grey eyes. His hair was pale-blond and his stance upright and proud. It took Harry one second to know that this was a rich, influential wizard, the type he'd never been able to stand. They were arrogant, caught up on their own importance and though they had money, they wouldn't even think of spending it generously unless it was for selfish reasons.

Something didn't fit into the picture, though. And that was his left arm. There was a mark... He couldn't tell what it was, but there was a mark beneath the black cloak he was wearing. He'd taken it willingly and was now forced to hide, but he was proud of it.

Harry wondered what the mark meant since it wasn't the same as his own... Subconsciously, he rubbed his wrist that was covered by his watch.

Why would a rich man carry a mark? Accepting it willingly even, given by someone who had power over him...

"Dear me, has the service here subsided so much that human help is required to clean the floor?" Harry's eyes snapped back looking straight into a cold, pale grey pair. That was enough! Nobody spoke of the goblins with such disrespect, not while he was around. He stood up, but not without helping Péosh first.

"Better yer leave now, Malfoy," Hagrid said coldly practically vibrating with anger. At that, the man turned around looking up into the gigantic man's face.

"Mr Hagrid," he spoke the 'mister' in such a condescending manner, it would've been better hadn't he said it at all, "It is always a questionable pleasure to meet you, but I believe that you aren't in the position of ordering me around."

Hagrid took a threatening step towards the smaller wizard who gripped his walking stick tightly and Harry was suddenly aware that it was about as much a walking stick as Hagrid's umbrella (which he'd used to enter Diagon Alley). His new friend might look like it, but he wasn't a violent man. He might leave bruises on those who aggravated him, but that was all. This Malfoy character on the other hand... He was much more collected, however, judging by the look in his eyes, he was ready to kill... Immediately, Harry stepped in between them and wordlessly told Hagrid to back off. Thankfully, he listened to him.

"I thought it was the Deputy Headmistress' job to introduce Muggles into the Magical World," it was remarkable how he managed to say 'Muggle' the same way he'd called Hagrid 'mister,' "I'm glad to notice that the headmaster has finally seen sense and decided to have them introduced by their equal."

"'t is a shame that you shan't see

for all thy purity

forbids you to glimpse clarity." Harry recited calmly. This was a fight of wits and he wouldn't let him win, "Surely, Avalàu, the Thestral, thought of something else than certain wizards' narrow-mindedness concerning the so-called purity of blood when he sang to Nacàlia, the unicorn, whom he fell in love with but who was never able to see him for she'd never spotted death. But it works on this one, too."

He managed not to grin in triumph when the tall man stared at him in disbelief, but merely lifted his eyebrows.

"I will not waste my time discussing ancient poetry with an impertinent brat who hasn't learnt his proper place in the Magical World." Without another word, he turned away from them and walked towards the exit. A moment later, he was gone.

Harry turned to Péosh, "I have this need to apologize for my fellow-wizard's behaviour..."

"Don't bother, my dear child," Péosh smiled, "It's been a while since I last heard the tale of Nacàlia and Avalàu."

"Kertak, a friend of mine, told me the story."

"And a very good thing, he did, I'd say. It is nice to see that the young ones are still hung up on the old stories." He chuckled good-humouredly.

"There's nothing better than a good tale next to a warming fire in a cold winter night," Harry replied returning the smile.

"Indeed. Well, young Harry. I believe you lingered in Gringotts for quite a while. If you want to obtain all of your acquisitions today, it is time for you to leave. I hope to see you again."

"Likewise, Péosh. It was a pleasure to meet you." At that, he bowed formally the way the young goblins did towards elders.

Accompanied by Hagrid, he left the Wizard Bank.

Last chapter was short, this one's long... It's all in a balance :-)

The second and last part of this chapter (Harry getting his wand will be one of the scenes) will be posted on Sunday or Monday...

Thank you very much for all the encouraging reviews and everybody who put me on story alert or marked it as favorite story.

Special thanks to vshnth, bookworm19065, In the Mix, tsuanyue, hash4uall, missme, Oceanfur and Scandinavian Shipper.

bookworm19065: Imagine it as an extremely difficult variation of the Summoning charm for Dumbledore didn't have that picture in his pocket.

Chapter 5, Part Two: Welcome Back to Diagon Alley

Hagrid didn't follow him into Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, muttering something about her never stopping to complain about his attire, which was why Harry entered the shop alone.

He'd never been in there nor had he ever met Madam Malkin, therefore he felt rather nervous. The bell rang when he entered, causing him to jump slightly.

A rather short witch approached him with a bright, honest smile.

"Hogwarts, dear?" she asked him, but continued without waiting for an answer, "Got the lot here." She gestured him to get on a stool nearby, slipped a long robe over his head and adjusted the length.

"Dear child, you need to grow a little. I'll have to cut off more than there will be left on your robe," she muttered and Harry closed his eyes. He was very short for his age, he knew that, but why did people think that his lack of height would also cause him to lack in maturity?

He asked her how business was going, which was replied by a positive review concerning these past weeks for Hogwarts was about to start again which was always a great benefit to her shop. She seemed a little surprised when he asked her about her working process, especially when it came to repairing things.

Harry was always interested in fixing stuff himself for he lacked (or at least, he used to lack) the money to have his things fixed by professionals, which was why he did all he could to learn from them.

By talking to Madam Malkin, he learned that robes were created out of all kinds of material, some of magical and others of non-magical origins, the former demanded special tricks if you wanted to fix things properly.

When she was done, he additionally bought some black thread in case he managed to tear up his robes. There was no reason to throw away a perfectly fine robe once it was torn.

When he exited, Hagrid was already there with two large ice creams in his hand. Smiling, he took his and started eating (chocolate and raspberry with chopped nuts).

"Thank you, Hagrid. Thanks for taking me along," he added for he knew that whatever he'd been asked to do by the headmaster, he'd done it at Gringotts.

"Me pleasure, Harry," the man replied kindly, "Yeh're really great to be around. Yeh have yer parents' wits."

"Don't know your parents, but likewise," Harry said, blushing slightly.

Once they finished their ice cream they entered Flourish and Blotts. Of all shops, this was the one Harry had been eager to enter these past years, ever since he'd found Diagon Alley.

Reading tired him, but he loved reading, though he was much more of a storyteller. He preferred hearing a story instead of reading it. However, extracting knowledge from books was something he'd always wanted to do, but hardly ever had the opportunity. Apart from the regular schoolbooks, he bought *Sanitas – Potions For Aches and Diseases of All Kinds* after he'd skimmed it a little and had found it very interesting. Potions and Herbology seemed to be just his subjects (next to *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*, he bought *Encyclopaedia of Medical Herbs*. The latter, the owner of the bookshop had told him, was rather complex and was difficult to understand at his age, but in a couple of years it would be well-valued).

Every other subject, he was unable to judge just yet. However, *Defence Against the Dark Arts* was bound to be important... Knowing how to defend yourself was a requirement in order to protect those you loved.

Buying quills and parchment was a rather short visit, but long enough to fill Harry with dread. His writing skills using a pencil were bad enough, he had no clue how to write with a quill. He confessed his worries to Hagrid who looked at him and turned walking right back into the shop. Minutes later, he left it carrying two identical books in a brown leather cover.

"These are books where yeh can improve yer writin' skills," Hagrid explained and handed over one of them, "'t is yours."

Harry looked at him speechlessly, "What about the other?"

"Could improve me writing skills as well. Once yeh have written a page, it erases it again. Is supposed ter be good."

What followed was a discussion that lasted for ten minutes of whether or not Harry should pay for it. In the end, Harry won the argument and paid his seven sickles for the book.

The pewter cauldron and several other goods were bought rather quickly. However, after an hour of discussing the effect of arnica and other herbs on open wounds, sprains and other injuries with the owner of the apothecary, Harry was dragged out of the shop by Hagrid.

"Yeh'll be good at Potions and Herbology, I bet," Hagrid said good-humouredly as they left.

Another half an hour later, they left Eeylops Owl Emporium with a stuttering Harry, who couldn't stop thanking Hagrid for the snowy white feathered birthday present. He'd never received a birthday present in his life, mainly because he hadn't known his birthday until the day before yesterday (Was it only three days ago?). The other reason was that all the people he knew hardly owned enough to live, let alone be able to buy presents. Kertak had sometimes given him small ones on Christmas, but that was about it.

All Harry had to buy now was the wand and that was the one thing Harry dreaded more than anything. If he entered this place, he would officially become what Kertak had called him on their first meeting.

A wand-carrier.

The wand would separate him from his family and friends for they were (apart from Hagrid) either goblins or non-magical humans (he'd never call them Muggles for that sounded condescending).

He didn't want to separate himself from them... He had no wish to be different.

Before he could say anything, he felt Kertak and Natruk approach and whirled around. To his surprise, both of them smiled.

"I..." he started, but he didn't know what to say.

Kertak advanced him and laid his hand on the young boy's shoulder, "Go on. I'm just a proud brother watching his younger sibling to become a part of the magical world. Getting a wand is a part of it."

Harry swallowed heavily, "Dàio."

Feeling a lot more confident, he entered Ollivander's shop.

The quietness in the dark shop disconcerted him. He felt the back of his neck prickle. This place was no day younger than the golden letter had said and if not the place itself, then the magic that surrounded it. He swallowed and turned towards the man who was approaching them almost soundlessly.

"Good day, sir," he said looking straight into the old man's wide, pale eyes.

"Good afternoon," Mr Ollivander's voice was as soft as silk, his silvery eyes spoke of age and isolation. It was impossible for Harry to deduct what kind of man he was, which was why he chose to be careful.

The man stopped, completely startled. "Could it be? Lily Evans and James Potter had a son, yes, but he was proclaimed dead."

"I'm Harry Potter," Harry answered. He wouldn't explain what happened, though. Fortunately, Mr Ollivander didn't ask. Instead, he continued explaining what kind of wands his parents had.

He spoke of the unique characters of his wands and their core made of a magical substance.

Then, he handed over several wands.

Harry tried. And tried. He had so much wood in his hands Harry started to doubt ever to find a wand that would fit him. Mostly, the wand didn't react at all or he held them the wrong way (which was

why Ollivander snatched them out of his hand immediately), but some of the wands reacted a lot more aggressively. Worst had been the wand which had broken the only light in the room and shattered every single window forcing Mr Ollivander to repair it all before they continued.

For a man whose entire shop nearly got destroyed, he was remarkably happy.

He moved into the back of his shop and arrived with another black box, "That is a very interesting wand... It might fit an interesting customer. Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."

Harry took the wand. And a pain unlike anything he'd ever felt before exploded in his lower abdomen. He'd been stabbed before, but this was so much worse. Horrified, he threw the wand away grabbing his aching stomach with his left hand.

"Curious, very curious," Ollivander said looking rather puzzled himself, "The wand core accepted you, but your magical core only accepted parts of the wand. What followed was rejection..."

Harry couldn't care less. He didn't want to relive this kind of pain again.

"That's it," he exclaimed, "I don't need that. If finding your wand means that much pain, I'm not interested in finding it."

"I am sorry, Mr Potter. I should have seen... Its brother murdered your parents... A connection only a foolish man would make. I apologize," he spoke rather hastily, seemingly unwilling to have his customer leave.

Reluctantly, while reminding himself of Kertak's words, he stayed. But the next wand, he took carefully. They continued trying.

In the meantime, a girl named Sally-Anne Perks entered the shop. Ollivander asked him to linger while he sought possible wands for Miss Perks beneath the chaos that Harry had left behind. It took her ten minutes to find a proper wand (unicorn hair and maple). Wistfully, Harry looked after the leaving girl wishing that he'd found his wand as quickly as her.

He had to try for another hour, before Ollivander asked him to come into the back of the shop. Hagrid followed them.

There was a small table with four stools in the middle of the room. There weren't as many wands in here than in the actual shop. They were offered tea, which puzzled Harry a little. Ollivander seemed absolutely delighted with his customer.

"Wand-making is a difficult and very old art, Mr Potter. Some of the wands that were made by my family over the last thousand and thousand of years were never sold. When you go into the old arts and inherit a shop the way I did, you have to remember every single wand that was created by you up to three generations before you. You need to know what the wand is like and to whom it was sold. Additionally, you have to know all the wands that were never sold and linger in the shop ever since their creation."

They drank tea in silence before Ollivander came with several boxes.

"These are all made of special kinds of woods."

Once again, Harry tried. None of them fit. The Hawthorn wand didn't nor any of the others.

Ollivander started whistling, causing Hagrid to shy away from him. It was a little creepy watching this man whistle in shier delight.

He came with another bucket full of boxes.

"These contain special cores."

None of them fit, either: the black unicorn hair, the Acromantula egg, the Basilisk fang, the Erumpent horn, the Griffin hair, the Lethifold hide, the Tebo bristle... Nothing.

He turned invisible after he touched the Tebo wand, but the wand didn't accept.

"And I was so sure..." Ollivander murmured. Harry almost apologized, but the man seemed to be growing with the challenge.

He left the room again and Harry looked at Hagrid deeply mortified, "I'm sorry."

"Don' be. Yeh'll get the right one, Harry. Don' worry."

"This one was created by my great-grandfather," Ollivander explained when he returned, "It was his last wand. Ash, phoenix feather and tear, eleven inches. Go on, try it out." He opened the box. In it was a dark brown wand.

He took it and felt sudden warmth in his fingers as if they'd never been warm before. He raised the wand and a stream of red and gold sparks shot from the end like a firework, throwing dancing spots of light on to the walls.

It was as if his right hand had waited for it. The wand seemed like its extension. Shakily he took a breath.

Hagrid cheered and Ollivander cried, "Oh, bravo! Yes, indeed, oh, very good." He carefully took the wand and put it back in its box muttering something Harry couldn't understand.

"Excuse me, sir, but what did you say?"

"Working phoenix tears into a core is very difficult, Mr Potter. Very difficult indeed, it takes years to become proficient at the technique. I so far have not managed it. This particular wand is very special for its wood is ash and 'out of the ashes the phoenix shall rise, its tears shall heal and its feathers fly'. It's a rare combination of all three..." As if he'd completely forgotten that he was wrapping the box into brown paper, he left the room and returned with a very old book, a notebook, it seemed.

He opened it and started reading, shaking his head, "There is no information about the phoenix who's given tear and feather. 'As soon as given its gift, the phoenix rises swift, touching the sky, towards the sun.' It doesn't say anything about its origin... I am very sorry, Mr Potter. My great-grandfather was an excellent wand-maker, but it seems as if age had made him forget to write down what is needed."

"It's okay, sir," Harry said. He was just glad to finally have found his wand.

Shortly after, they left the shop. To Harry's surprise, his friends were still there waiting for him.

He approached them, "Don't tell me you've been waiting for nearly two hours."

"Coming from the person who waited in the freezing cold for three hours..." Kertak began, but was interrupted.

"That was different... I thought..."

"Children, please!" Natruk chimed in with a good-humoured smile. Miscommunication between Kertak and Harry were rare, but that winter day had been one of those times and had resulted in a nine-year-old almost catching a cold while waiting for his friend to arrive... Kertak would've never forgiven himself had Harry become sick. Thankfully, he didn't. But it was a sore topic for his steward's son.

"Show me," the younger goblin demanded curiously. Harry picked up his wand-box, opened it and presented his dark brown wand. The goblins looked at it, then at Harry. While young Kertak was only able to feel the magical cores of the wand-carriers when they flared, Natruk could see the core's forms all the time. It allowed him to judge character but not power... That he could only guess when the core flared.

Harry's core had always struck Natruk.

Honesty, fierce loyalty and kindness, that was the first impression he'd made on him. Harry's past was dark and it was most unlikely that he hadn't been touched by it, but his core wasn't affected by it, at least not on the surface. Natruk had never prided himself to be capable of seeing souls, the Core's Core.

It didn't matter. To him, Harry was a good child and that was all that was important. The wand matched Harry's forms perfectly.

The wand chose the wizard by seeking its twin.

Or so, the stories told. Natruk wouldn't know. He wasn't a wand-carrier.

"It fits you," Kertak said with a smile which was replied by Harry.

"Do you need to leave, Mr Hagrid, Gamekeeper of Hogwarts, or is Harry allowed to visit one last shop?" Natruk asked formally with a bow.

"Harry can go, o'course... er... goblin whose name I don't know." Hagrid replied with a clumsy bow. He was a bit surprised to see the underage wizard blush, until he realized that it was apparently common courtesy amongst goblins that the party who knew both sides would introduce them to each other.

After Harry officially told his friends' names, he followed the goblins who led them to another shop. It was a bit hidden, only a few shops away from Flourish and Blotts.

Oculus – Eyes, Lenses and Glass at Your Disposal

"Sandra Weitsicht is the best optician in Diagon Alley. She will be adjusting your glasses today," Kertak explained, "Before you ask... That is your birthday present. You didn't allow us to give you anything for the last six years. So, allow us this."

"But..." Harry protested.

"My dear friend, you are blind, just in case you haven't noticed. Yes, you've found means to overcome that particular problem, but it is unnecessary and no, you wouldn't buy this for yourself because it won't benefit anyone but you which is why we will give you this present." Good friends did have one disadvantage: they take away your arguments before you can say them.

Defeated (and grateful), Harry entered the shop.

"Ah, Master Natruk. What a pleasure to see you again." Surprised, Harry noticed that the shop was owned by a lady that was not human. She wasn't a goblin, either, though...

"Harry Potter, this is Sandra Weitsicht. She's a kobolt." At Harry's puzzlement, Natruk explained, "Kobolts are often called German goblins, which isn't true. We are closer related than we are to humans, but to call a kobolt 'goblin' would be as if we'd call an ogre

a 'troll.' We look remarkably alike, but we are not closely related. Lady Weitsicht will be helping you with your glasses."

"That I will. Why don't you sit down," she said, gesturing towards a wooden chair. The underage wizard did as was told.

"So, let's take a look at... Nilràù Natruk! Crasnac?" Harry raised his eyebrows. She'd practically said 'What the hell...?' "What are you thinking? Giving this boy glasses? If I cover these eyes by any sort of spectacles, I do not deserve to be called optician," Well, he couldn't very well walk blindly across the world, "Here, child! Put these on."

The device she gave him was rather strange. It looked a bit like glasses, but the glass was covered by a shimmering surface which seemed to be some sort of liquid. He wanted to put his glasses down, but she told him to keep them on.

A few seconds later, she told him to remove the glasses and Harry started to think that she wasn't quite right in the head. Ten minutes later she took off the device, put his glasses in his hands and turned to Natruk, "He's short-sighted... severely short-sighted. This pathetic excuse of what they dared to call glasses didn't help much. In fact, they worsened his eyesight significantly. At this point, I wouldn't even dare to recommend glasses, not even self-adjusting ones, all aesthetics aside. But the alternative is rather expensive..." So far, it had irritated Harry that Lady Weitsicht seemed to be ignoring him as if he was incapable of his own thoughts, but after she'd said that, he simply wanted to disappear.

He couldn't accept that.

He was about to protest when Kertak laid both of his hands on his shoulders saying firmly, "Please, Harry. Let us do this for you. Don't object, please." The emerald-eyed boy had never heard Kertak plead. Except for that one time... He hadn't complied then, but he surely wouldn't refuse now. He simply nodded.

Lady Weitsicht left the room and returned shortly after with a bottle. The label said 'Liquidus Ocular'.

"That is one of the latest developments in ophthalmology," She explained opening the bottle. Its design reminded Harry of

medicines that had to be topically used on the cornea. "Tilt your head back," she ordered, "And keep your eyes open!"

Then she let one drop of the liquid fall into each eye.

"This potion puts an invisible layer over your eyes. Within the next twenty-four hours it will continuously adjust your eyesight until you are capable of seeing one hundred percent. For now, you will be a bit blind since you shouldn't keep wearing those glasses of yours. Tomorrow morning, you most likely will feel a bit dizzy since during those eight hours of sleep," Harry had to suppress a laugh for he rarely slept more than six hours, "The potion will keep adjusting your eyesight. Good thing about this potion is that its effect lessens after a month, but that loss happens a lot quicker. One evening, you see perfectly fine, the next day, you're blind again. You won't lose your eyesight during the day. This kind of therapy you will have to do until you're about sixteen... Then, we shall see again. The potion can be used for two hundred years without having to fear any side-effects, so no fear about that... I don't ever want to have glasses cover those beautiful eyes of yours again. In a few years, the ladies will come in here and thank me for that decision."

Harry looked at the optician, but he couldn't see her facial expression. He could make out the symmetrical slightly darker spots that had to be her eyes and her nose and lips. Everything else was a blur.

Could it be? Was it possible that he would be able to see properly?

He thanked her and Kertak led him outside, therefore not giving him the chance to find out how much Natruk would pay.

With Hagrid on Harry's other side, they sat down. The youngest of the three grew quiet.

"Don't think about the cost..." Kertak started, but for once the underage wizard could honestly say that this wasn't the issue.

"I can't tell them anything, can I? Not even Char..."

"Not yet, at least. Richard is trustworthy, I know that, but it would be too early. But there's one thing you can tell them..."

"Hey, guys! I'm rich'?" He sounded very sad stating this. Kertak sometimes forgot how little Harry owed (or used to owe) and street children's general opinion of 'rich people.'

"You will always be 'Harry' to them," he replied softly.

Harry's shoulders slumped. "I hope so. I'll tell Char anyhow. The others... The little ones won't care, but I know that Alex would." Natruk approached them putting his money-bag back into a pocket of his cloak. "The donations are anonymous, aren't they, sir?"

"Of course, they are," Natruk replied with a smile.

There was a moment of comfortable silence before Hagrid spoke up, "I invite yeh all to a cuppa tea in the Leaky Cauldron."

Neither of the goblins declined and so they went for the famous pub leading in and out of Diagon Alley. (It amazed Kertak while they walked how securely his brother of choice was able to move although he saw even less than usual).

While they were talking at their table, Harry managed to sneak away and meet with Tom alone.

"Harry Potter," Tom said when he approached, "I should have seen it. Your mother's eyes were one of a kind, but, well... Forgive an old fool, but I never thought it wise to pry."

"You'd have never seen me again if you had," Harry replied honestly, "I just wanted to thank you for that extreme generosity of yours, sir. I owe you..."

"Absolutely nothing at all," Tom interrupted him, "It was my pleasure."

"I would like to repay you for you'd consider me a simpleton if you honestly think that I actually believe that the food you used to give me were leftovers." He took the bag full of galleons and opened it, but the owner of the pub took a step back.

"Never would I accept money from a child for simply giving them what they deserve. Don't insult me by believing I do." Harry

pondered on the kindness of the man and tried to think of a way to repay so it would satisfy them both.

"Leaving the Leaky Cauldron into the non-magical world there is an alley leading away from the main street... Put the food next to the trash can about twenty yards further. They won't take it at first, but if you keep doing so for several days, they'll do it. For whatever food you provide them, I'll pay." He looked straight into the blurry face in front of him. A few moments later, he noticed Tom avoiding his gaze. The good thing about being half-blind was that it took all of your concentration to focus on the face in front of you, which was why you were able to keep eye-contact while well-sighted people weren't.

"It's a deal, then," Tom said firmly. He'd known Lily Evans and with the glasses off, Harry's face resembled hers a lot more than before. However, he hadn't ever been on the receiving end of Lily Potter's glares. Well, the orphan in front of him hadn't glared, but, Merlin, that boy could disconcert you.

Besides, his idea had merit.

"Don't go there at night," Harry warned not avoiding his gaze once, "Nights aren't safe... Not for outsiders. Early mornings and evening are fine. Go there at the exact same time every day. Like this, they will be prepared for your arrival."

"How many orphans live on the streets?" Tom couldn't help but ask.

"Some." The answer was careful, "It's not just children, you know. There are a lot of homeless people and they all need to eat." He wanted to add something, but Hagrid called for him asking whether he was ready to go.

Harry said goodbye to Tom, Kertak and Natruk thanking them all separately for their generosity. Then, he followed Hagrid.

They agreed that Harry shouldn't bring all the stuff he'd bought back to St Mary's... The cauldron, the owl (he would have to find a proper name for her) and other things would be taken to Hogwarts by Hagrid while his schoolbooks (that were supposed to cover their true selves from non-magical eyes) and his wand (which he put into the sleeve of his ragged pullover) as well as some money remained with Harry.

Harry thanked him once again and handed him the owl.

"You need a name," he said to her. He took A History of Magic, opened it and said, "The first name I find in here will be your name." His nose nearly touched the book for without his glasses it was even harder to read, "Ah, Wendelin the Weird. What do you say?" He laughed while he asked her, but stopped pretty quickly at her outraged expression, "Sorry...er... Bathilda?" He swore that her expression just got murderous and he had to suppress a smile. He already liked that owl. He'd liked her the second he'd entered and they'd looked at each other. It just... fit, for lack of a better explanation. He continued skimming the pages until... "Hedwig," he whispered it. It was perfect and the satisfied sound that escaped his owl's beak confirmed him, "You're name is Hedwig. We'll be seeing each other very soon, my girl. You can come by of course, but try not to be seen by... Hagrid, if I tell them that owls are used as carrier-pigeons by the school I go to, can I keep her? I'll be sending Hedwig for correspondence with them anyhow. They'll find out, sooner or later."

"Guess that's alright, Harry," Hagrid replied, who had smiled the entire time while watching the interaction. He'd known Harry was a good kid, but there was nothing like watching people interact with animals. Animals were never wrong when it came to judging character and Hedwig had bonded to Harry immediately.

And the bond was strong. Usually, to create such a bond to your Familiar took years.

Professor Dumbledore and Fawkes.

Filch and Mrs Norris.

Fang and him.

It was remarkable that the strongest bonds between Familiar and wizard he knew all lived within the same castle. And it seemed as if there was another bond in the making that would be strengthened at Hogwarts.

"I'll take yer stuff to me house and will be bringin' it on yer first day."

"I don't want to bother you, Hagrid..." Those ruddy goblins made a mistake by taking this boy's glasses for they'd shielded the power of Lily's eyes.

A shield that was gone now.

He gulped looking at the small child in front of him, "Yeh're not a bother, Harry. Never. Not ter me. Yeh're me friend, if yeh wanna be, that is..."

He could speak no further for a small bundle of human crushed into his legs and he crouched down smiling.

There were no words needed.

They were friends and they would be there for each other. Suddenly, when he looked at those emerald eyes again, Hagrid realized that, apart from Professor Dumbledore, he might have just found his fiercest defender.

His thoughts were still hung up on this extraordinarily bright, grown-up kid long time after they'd said goodbye to each other.

He'd always been looking forward to seeing the children come back again. This year, he could hardly wait for the term to begin.

Hedwig was in St Mary's orphanage for only half an hour when she was officially declared as world's best pet. They adored her and Harry had to declare very strict rules so they wouldn't smother the owl.

None of them had ever seen a real owl before.

The fact that she would be their connection to Harry made her a saint in Sara's eyes. The underage wizard was very relieved to see that Hedwig liked his family as much as she seemed to like him.

The mayhem her presence caused allowed him to hide his schoolbooks.

About three hours after his arrival, he finally had the opportunity to have a few moments of privacy with Char. Like this, he was able to confess.

"So, your parents were loaded?" Char asked. Harry tried to deduct what he thought.

What use was there to have what the others liked to call a sixth sense when it abandoned him when he truly needed it? He was completely incapable of finding out how Char felt about it.

"It's surprising, I know. Apparently, I have to become of age before I can gain access to everything," Harry immediately started to explain.

"How much will be donated anonymously within the next couple of days?" Char asked looking at him. Once again, he cursed his eyes for all he could see was a blur. He couldn't say what Char thought.

"I don't know, I told them that everything I won't need for school can be donated, but a close friend of Kertak is taking care of it... Why are you shaking your head? Are you shaking your head?" It frustrated him to no end that he couldn't even say that for sure.

"Those lenses of yours sure as hell work strangely, mate," Char said. When Harry had appeared without glasses, he had to explain of course what happened and lenses sounded like a really good explanation. Lenses that had been donated by friends.

"Char..." Surely, they wouldn't fight now, would they? Not over money, not after everything they'd gone through.

"Harry, calm down. It's fine. It's great, actually. I'm glad that a friend of Kertak's taking care of everything, you know. That means they'll make sure you'll still have some money left for yourself."

Harry hadn't thought of it so far. But yes, Natruk would make sure he didn't donate too much.

"How did you know I would donate anonymously?" It truly puzzled him. Was he that predictable?

"Oh, jus' a feelin', ma friend," Char answered with a mischievous smile.

"Quit the Gutter Talk." He smiled as well.

They were okay. Suddenly, breathing became a lot easier.

Hello, everybody!

Thank you very much for your reviews, 'story alerts' and 'favorite story'! There were nine reviews *dancingaroundhappily*! Thanks!

Well, as you can see. The plot is taking a first official AU turn, BUT:

- Harry is the BWL (there will be changes to canon, though)

Special thanks to my reviewers:

In the Mix, Scandinavian Snapper, justbin, bookworm19065, Skipernicus, mudbloodpotter05, lyrsiiea and ani!

justbin: It's a good question that I'm not ready to answer just yet :-)

lyrsiiea: Answer to that will follow within two chapters; Good reasoning, though.

Next Chapter: The Boys Who Lived (guess you know what that means :-))

Chapter 6, Part One: The Boys Who Lived

The last four weeks at the orphanage were an emotional rollercoaster for everybody. Additionally to Harry's departure to a boarding school and Alex's job at the bakery, little Gabriela found a home. Seeing kids leave, was always tough on everyone, but it was especially hard on Johnny who'd been taking care of her quite a lot.

Harry's heart had nearly stopped when people arrived who seemed to have a keen interest in Tommy. Logically, Harry knew that the little boy most likely would bloom in an adequate home without any competition. Especially considering his coming departure would be hard on the three-year-old who'd never learned the meaning of that word. However, the thought of never seeing Tommy again was incredibly painful.

And that would be the consequence of adoption. At that age, they hardly ever came back. It was just the way things were.

Anyway, the couple had arrived and they'd spoken to Tommy.

The next day, they'd come back again.

The day after that, they'd come again.

The entire orphanage had been nervous.

It was crazy, really. Harry distinctly remembered the three orphanages he'd lived in during the course of his life. The first one had been abandoned as soon as one had the chance. It hadn't been terrible, but it hadn't been good either. Harry himself had snuck away one night.

He'd been five years old, hardly old enough to survive on the streets, but he'd preferred them over living at that place.

No one had been allowed to leave Hell. Nobody. Sullivan had seen to that.

Kyle might have gotten away. He'd never know.

St Mary's on the other hand was safe, much safer than the uncertainty of living with people you didn't know without having your friends as backup.

That was why they were always nervous when people came.

That couple (he didn't bother to remember their names) had been rather kind and would've made good parents, but Tommy was a special case.

Harry doubted they would have gotten along.

Despite the pain he'd feel if he never saw Tommy again, he would always think of his favourite accident-prone first. He'd observed the family and thought they might be able to give Peter a home, maybe even Christopher, but Tommy wouldn't have fit.

He'd been so glad when Tommy had said he wanted to stay.

Harry knew how much his opinion counted which was why he was really careful before he gave it. The mere thought of carrying blame like Micah Cline (who hadn't cared about their fates and was now living with the consequences) twisted his guts. He never said 'yes' before he hadn't taken a really good look at the families and couples that entered this orphanage every now and then.

They never liked it much. They always got nervous in his presence, really. So, it wasn't a big surprise that no one had ever been interested in him.

That was okay, though. He had his family. It was a strange bunch of different people, even beings, but somehow they matched.

Apart from an orphanage's daily life, quite a lot of things happened within his last month of living at St Mary's. ('Cut it off! You'll be back, stop fidgeting,' his voice of reason kept telling him, but it wasn't of much use. The thought of leaving burned him).

There had been bad moments. For example, when Luke, Sara and he slowly started to get prepared for Harry's departure, meaning they had to learn to sleep without having the underage wizard in the same room.

It had been cruel. The first night Sara had cried for half an hour straight before he'd sent all preparation to hell and had gone back into their room. After about three weeks, it got better. There were nights when he was in their room, there were nights when he wasn't. Sara had accepted it quite well, though it had taken some time.

When Harry wasn't sleeping in his old room, he slept in the toddlers' room on a small mattress. Good thing was that Sister Augustine didn't need to get up at night for Harry knew the routines necessary when a child woke up in the night.

There had been funny moments.

At least for Char when Harry had marvelled the day after he'd returned from his trip with the strange gigantic man that they'd somehow received new chairs. Char kindly explained to him that it was the same chair as ever, he'd just never seen the carving clearly before.

Half of the house looked completely different now. Life was so much easier when you didn't have to get really close to the things you wanted to examine. It was only then when he noticed just how bad he'd seen before. Harry noticed that you could actually recognize people at distances of about twenty feet by seeing their faces instead of looking at their walking stile.

Reading suddenly became a lot less tiring as well. That was the greatest gift this potion had given him. Merely thanking Natruk and Kertak would never be enough.

And it was a good thing that reading wasn't as tiring anymore.

For his school books were very interesting. Whenever he found time (meaning at four o'clock in the morning or late into the night at the kitchen table) he read those books. He did it at nights and early mornings for he wanted to spend as much time as he could with his family. He felt bad about leaving them, not only because he felt responsible for most of them but because he knew he'd miss them as hell.

Those nights he'd been departed from Sara and Luke had given an insight into his own heart. Something he had never been aware of.

In his entire life, he'd never slept alone. Or at least, that he could remember.

In the first orphanage, he'd lived in a room with ten other kids. In Hell... That was another story, but fact remained that hadn't they curled up together at night, they wouldn't have survived the winter. Same thing applied for the streets.

He dearly hoped that there would be dorms, not separate bedrooms.

He couldn't bare the thought of not hearing another living being breathe within the same chamber.

Without having proof that he wasn't the only one alive in the room.

He shuddered when he thought of that one night in Hell... He'd tried to warm Neil up, but... He quivered and distracted himself from the dark thoughts.

Back then, his magic hadn't helped.

He wondered if he would've succeeded with a wand.

Wands made certain magic a lot simpler, a lot less draining. For example, the transfiguration he'd done the day he'd visited Diagon Alley worked just as well and with the same principle as it did without a wand, but he was able to hold it without having to constantly point at the transfigured flower.

On the other hand, warming people up or helping them heal worked either way with or without a wand (that he kept hidden beneath his ragged pullover). In fact, since physical contact for both actions was needed, the wand hindered his actions more than it helped.

Reading the books, he noticed that especially Charms held much variety and space to try new things... He could hardly wait to learn the basics.

Herbology was a subject he was looking forward to as well. It was the one subject he was sure that he wouldn't mess up too much. He'd always been good at learning the names of plants and he'd been taking care of St Mary's garden for quite a while. Before, Kertak had been his source of knowledge. The goblin drew him a

world outside of mere parks (the only green he'd come close to while living in London's centre), of wild meadows and magical forests. It always enthralled him.

If Charms was the subject of vast variety when it came to using a wand and spells, Potions was the quiet art of logic and patience. The brewing of drafts held so much potential, it was frightening.

However, it was also interesting.

Especially the one book he'd bought extra: Sanitas.

Hadn't the first sentence in the book been 'All medicines are poisons,' he most likely would have started brewing in secrecy right away. Potions fascinated him, but he had the greatest respect for them. He was looking forward to that class, but most especially the teacher.

He hoped that Charms and Potions were taught by flexible people, although it was clear that it would take years before he could start to try things out.

Trial and error. Life sometimes worked that way. Sometimes the lessons were painful (for he had not known that walls made of stone didn't move as willingly as brick walls), but as long as they only hurt him, it wasn't bad. He simply didn't want to injure those he cared about.

Which was why he was careful using his wand.

He truly was looking forward to learning the basics.

Transfiguration was strange. It was a dangerous subject, especially if you transformed things into something that wasn't similar. Apparently, turning a flower into a frog was a lot more difficult than turning a match into a needle.

That simply wasn't true. That match stubbornly remained a match which was why he decided to wait for classes before he tried another transfiguration.

The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection he didn't really know what to think of. The first chapter he deemed utterly useless.

If one wishes you ill, they might resort to the Dark Arts.

You really didn't need to resort to dark magic if you wanted to hurt someone...

The book didn't say much about actual defence except for general platitudes, such as 'watch your back.' He dearly hoped the teacher of that subject was better than the book. He wanted to be able to defend himself (and his family) as well as he could and he doubted that the little tricks he learned in the course of the years would help him much if he were up against a fully grown wizard.

Oh, he was fast, but problem was that when he ran, he always left people behind and that was unacceptable.

Harry loved looking at the stars at night which was why he didn't dread Astronomy too much. He kind of hoped they would be told the tales surrounding the constellations, the way Sully, one of his first protectors, had told him.

The only book he hadn't been able to skim so far was History of Magic, but since Kertak had told him lots about it and the tension between wizards, witches and goblins (he'd been rather reluctant sometimes when he was inclined to speak ill of the decisions of the wand-carriers for he'd always believed his younger friend to be one), it hopefully wouldn't be too bad.

Today was his last day and Harry could hardly believe it. Soon, very soon, he would be mounting the Hogwarts train.

He'd had so little time to prepare... His writing skills were still awful for he hadn't had time to practise...

Anyway, as nervous as this new chapter in his life made him, it was nothing compared to what he felt when he noticed Char's approach.

He would tell him. After hours and almost days of serious discussion with Kertak weighing the pros and cons, they'd come to the decision that Char deserved to be told of his talents.

Harry trusted Char with his life and today, he would prove that. Figuratively spoken, of course. He doubted the Wizarding World

would execute an eleven-year-old for telling his best friend and brother of the magical world.

He was quite sure of it.

He knew Char wouldn't talk. Apart from the fact that it was a question of loyalty, Char wasn't exactly chatty with anyone else but him.

What worried him was the possibility that he might never look at him the same way again... He could lose one of his closest friends!

Next to Kertak the only person he relied on. Alex and him were partners, he was her equal, but Alex never had to look out for him.

The thought of losing Char worried him much more than he was able to voice. Silently, they approached the tree that had become their private spot, especially these past few weeks.

"There's something I have to tell you," Harry started hesitantly, "But you must swear to me that no matter what you think of it, this conversation will stay between us."

Harry could see the teenager's eyes widen at that. This was serious and the older kid just realized that.

"Not a single word," Char promised firmly.

"I... don't really know how to explain this," Harry started. He'd prepared his speech, but looking at his friend, all clever thoughts were useless and he started stuttering again, "Remember what Sullivan," he cringed a little at Char's violent flinch. He sometimes forgot that very few but him had spoken that name, "Screeched that night the building burned down?"

He should have taken a better example for his friend's eyes widened in uncontained fear. Bringing back dark memories hadn't been his goal. He wanted to say something to soothe Char's troubled mind, but said child already whispered, "'Yeh're hell's breed, hell's breed, yeh're, freak!' Kinda hard to forget, Harry."

"I'm sorry," the underage wizard apologized, "It's just... Sullivan said that because he saw me walk through fire."

"We all saw you do that. To save Sara."

No one had seen him do what Sullivan had.

"That didn't strike you odd?" Harry asked instead of voicing his thought.

"I long ago stopped wondering about some of the things you do... walking through fire, your speed, being pushed off a rough top but landing safely, or that unique talent you have at making people feel better... It's who you are. And it's a good thing that you are just that."

Harry looked away. That, he'd not expected. Of course, he knew his non-magical friends were perceptive, but it was another to hear a list of the 'odd' things he used to do over the years. He would have to learn that 'living in secrecy' bit.

On the other hand, if it helped his family...

"There's a reason behind all that..." he started and told him of his first trip to Diagon Alley, then the day he'd met Kertak and some of the things he'd heard ever since. That he was a wizard, that the tales of unicorns and hippogriffs were just that, fictional tales, but that those beings actually existed and that Kertak was a goblin. Once he'd started, it was impossible for him to stop.

Char listened to him in silence, he was unusually calm and collected, for once their roles were revised for when one of them had been upset in the past it had always been Char (with only few exceptions).

Harry suddenly blurted, "Talk to me."

The teenager's eyebrows lifted almost imperceptibly, then he smirked, "That you were loaded shocked me more."

The underage wizard was flabbergasted. For a moment, he was speechless.

"Oh Harry! Don' look at me like this, mate. It's good to finally have an explanation for some o'the things happenin' around you. I'ma keep my mouth shu'. Don' worry!"

When he saw the green eyes brighten (without having the decency of chastising him for speaking Gutter Talk), he took a step forward and grabbed his 'brother's' shoulders. When he spoke again, his voice was soft, "It's okay, Harry. You're you, that there is a name for it, doesn't matter. It never did."

"I should've told you long ago," the younger boy murmured. He'd been so stupid! How could he have ever worried about Char's reaction? He could have avoided quite a lot of sleepless hours. He avoided the taller boy's grip by squirming a bit, moved one step forward and embraced his brother.

"I'll miss you," Harry choked a bit, but he didn't cry, "I'll miss all of you."

Char's grip suddenly tightened and the younger kid realized that he wasn't the only one fighting tears. The words, which sounded forcibly calm, verified his thoughts, "When're you gonna leave, 'morrow?"

"Six o'clock. Train leaves a'eleven. It'll be a four-hour-walk a'the best a times, and if I wait for yeh to wake up... Ain't ever gonna leave if I do."

"Quit the Gutter Talk," Char reprimanded him, desperately trying to lighten up the mood. He didn't want to think about tomorrow. The orphanage would be empty without this short eleven-year-old with the black, unruly hair, those frighteningly powerful, green eyes (without glasses to contain them, their influence had multiplied. Not that their owner was aware of that) and a heart as big as you didn't find anywhere else in the world.

Thankfully, the role reversal showed its effect. Harry looked at him, brightened up and laughed heartedly.

Oh, he'd miss that laughter.

-.-.-..

In the course of the day, Harry said goodbye to all inhabitants of St Mary's. With a smile he'd seen Sister Augustine working out a financial plan because of a very generous, anonymous donation that would enable her to buy enough food and fresh clothing for a year.

Kertak told him that Natruk would be sending three rather charitable, separate donations in the course of three months that would allow her to improve her budget of this year. After that, there will be annual donations of considerable height that most likely would even allow her to secure her children's education.

Sister Augustine told him that all of them would miss him, but at the same time assured him that they would get by. Especially since Alex would stay.

The goodbyes that were the hardest were the ones he had to offer his charges, Tommy, Sara, Luke and Grey. Of course, he felt responsible for everybody, but the latter three he'd worried about long before knocking at the doors of St Mary's.

And Tommy was Tommy.

The three-year-old seemed to understand that there was something odd going on when Harry told him tales of Evol that day. Usually, he didn't tell stories as sad as this one.

At seven, when it was time for him to go to bed, and his guardian angel (for Harry could be nothing less than that) kissed him goodnight, he learned that angels too could sob. But he'd been too tired to ask him what was going on.

.-.-.-.-

The night was quiet and Harry couldn't sleep. Without making a sound, he left his chamber (he'd promised Sara to sleep in their room this last night), descended the stairs and walked outside into the yard.

Nobody would see or hear him now unless he wanted them to. Not even Sara who was currently asleep.

He sat into the grass leaning against his beloved tree and was gazing the stars. He wasn't a singer, had never been. Alex could, Sully had sung for him, but he was more of a storyteller.

And that was the problem.

You could always sing alone, but to tell a story took someone to listen to it. And that was why he sat silently beneath the tree in complete darkness.

Until he felt familiar warmth on the other side of the hedge causing him to smile.

"I told him," Harry began quietly. Tonight wasn't a night of saying 'hello.' They were supposed to talk for hours before saying 'farewell.'

"And it didn't make the slightest difference to him," Kertak completed the sentence.

"I sometimes wonder if I deserve that kind of loyalty and trust," Harry continued, playing with his hands.

"More than anyone else I know." It was spoken so seriously, Harry looked up in surprise. "It's not as if they're only loyal to you. You're loyal to them as well, remember?"

'I'm going to leave them. How loyal can I be?' He almost said it, but he didn't want to make Kertak angry. Not tonight.

"Have you learned a lot?"

At that, Harry was able to convey some of the knowledge he'd acquired. Apart from that, he said how nervous he was. He knew he was barely magical enough... Compared to what his contemporaries could do.

Kertak's tone was a bit derisive (the way it always sounded when he spoke of wand-carriers in general, carefully excluding Harry and, ever since their meeting last month, Rubeus Hagrid), "Really? Pray tell me what they can you that you can't."

"Their core flares when it's threatened," Harry explained looking deadly serious, "Professor Dumbledore told me. Accidental magic, he called it. My core never flared, except for that one time I cannot even remember for I was two at the time. Why would it do that? The others are able to perform magic unconsciously. I'm not."

'You couldn't be more wrong, saràn-ki. I don't know why your core never flared when that thing mistreated you, but I've seen you perform magic unconsciously, I've seen your core flare.'

He didn't say it aloud. Instead he stated, "Don't worry, saràn-ki, for you possess enough magic to do well at Hogwarts. Not only would you have not received the letter otherwise, but because I've always known it. Trust me."

Harry smiled and nodded, seemingly a lot more relaxed. Kertak realized once again just how much influence he had over his young friend's heart. It was a responsibility he took more seriously than anything else.

"Kertak. I've wanted to ask you something... Sara, is there a chance she's magical, too?"

Kertak leaned back a little, deeply in thought. Was there a chance? He'd never seen any core activity...

"Why would you think so?"

"Just a feeling," Harry said quickly, "Or wishful thinking, I don't know. It's just... She's the only person that can hear me come closer, as long as I'm not trying to stick to shadows. That's why I thought..."

"Time will tell and since I'll be spending much more time here in near future, I might be able to tell you more," Kertak smiled mischievously. He knew what would be said in a moment.

"You don't have to..."

"Actually, I do..." This time, he couldn't contain his smirk, "You see, Nilràù Natruk wants me to complete Tenkri by the end of next year. Meaning, I have to study, and... Well, what better place is there than this yard?"

Tenkri was the graduation of a goblin's first stage of education. Every goblin completed Tenkri between thirty and forty years of age. Kertak was one of the 'Early-Risers.'

They had to study very hard to complete their education eight years before the average did. In this case, it was a decision out of guile more than anything else.

Harry accepted the gift with a shake of his head and a genuine smile. He did so gratefully, and it would be beneficial for Kertak's future, too.

For an hour, they talked about everything they could think of, before it was time for Harry to sleep if he wanted to get up as early as he intended.

It was the goodbye that hurt the least. Not because Harry cared about Kertak less than the others, if at all it was the contrary (with only few exceptions), but because it was as his goblin friend had said:

'I'm just a proud brother watching his younger sibling to become a part of the magical world.'

Hogwarts was a part of that. And, for the first time today, he was happy.

Thrilled to see the enormous castle for the first time.

Overjoyed to enter the magical world.

Simply happy to be a wizard.

.....

He got up at four and did his daily routines that were completed by half-past five. Then, he soundlessly packed, shouldered his bags that contained his books, Hedwig's cage (the owl he'd told to fly ahead and though she'd never been to Hogwarts, she seemed to know where to go), and all the clothes he owned and struggled down the stairs.

He'd definitely need four hours with this amount of luggage.

Harry looked back upstairs and whispered "goodbye" to nobody in particular. With a sad smile he turned around and walked towards the door.

All of the sudden he stopped dead in his tracks and smirked, "Nice of you to get up early and say goodbye."

The fourteen-year-old behind him snorted quietly at that and approached him and took one of his bags, "Let's go."

Harry was so glad to have company he didn't even try to protest. It was still dark as they walked across the streets of 'Outer London.' Char asked him about the subjects he would have and the underage wizard was all too happy to oblige.

"That'll sound strange, but where exactly is that train going to wait for you since I don't think that King's Cross owns a special platform for magical beings?"

Harry wordlessly handed him the train ticket he'd received by owl post one evening (along with an apologetic note from Hagrid who'd forgotten to hand it to him. He'd promptly replied by asking where exactly that platform nine and three-quarters was), "Apparently there is. You have to cross the barrier between platforms nine and ten, there is a secret platform with the train waiting."

Char smiled, "How excited are you? Really? I mean, yes, you'll miss us, but I know you, Harry. Tell me."

"I'm a wizard, Char," a fact that still amazed him, "I can go to a school that teaches magic! Who wouldn't be thrilled? It's a child's dream to be able to study magic."

'That's the first time ever I heard you refer to yourself as kid, Harry. What does that say about your life?'

Silently, they walked yet another mile. When they got closer to London's Centre and King's Cross, Char became more agitated, while Harry was glad being home yet again. He noticed his loyal friend's anxiety, though.

"You okay?"

"We're not even five hundred feet away from it. How do you think I feel?" He hadn't meant to sound so aggressive. Fortunately, scaring Harry was not so easy. He didn't even flinch.

"It burned to the ground, Char, there's nothing left." Whenever they spoke of Hell, it astonished the older teenager just how collected his best friend was. And of all kids that had lived at that place, it had been the eleven-year-old who'd been treated the worst.

Char shuddered and immediately felt a calming hand on his shoulder. Warmth spread through him and the pain of the past retreated to become nothing more than a dull ache.

To get to King's Cross directly, they had to cross the street where Hell had been hidden for many years. None of them spoke while they walked the ground that was all too familiar to them.

Harry, who'd been rubbing his wrist unconsciously, looked at his watch and noticed that it was a bit after ten. They would arrive early, but he didn't have the slightest wish to linger here.

However, they both stopped when they had a clear view on the last few bricks left that were made of stone.

The last reminder of Hell.

Behind the ruins of the wall that had once been more than ten feet high was nothing. Once there had been a building whose white colour had been a gross contradiction to what had been happening inside.

For white was called the colour of innocence after all.

He looked up at Char's face while opening his mouth to say something along those lines, but Char looked as ashen as the wall's colour used to. Forgotten what he'd wanted to say, he grabbed the teenager's shoulder and said firmly, "Come on. Let's not dwell on the past. It does us no good. Let's go!"

And on they went.

Only thirty minutes later, they could see King's Cross. They both stopped. The teenager didn't like being around too many people and Harry wouldn't force him to.

Time for one last goodbye.

Char silently handed him his bag and said, "One thing. Let me just say one thing... Have fun!" Harry started to laugh, but when he saw that Char didn't, he furrowed his eyebrows. "I mean it. Enjoy it. Do your best. At that place, you don't have to take care of everything. Let the adults worry about that... Be a kid, the way you always allowed the rest of us to be. You deserve it."

Harry smiled softly before it got a little more mischievous, "Too bad you didn't speak Gutter Talk. I wanted to reprimand you one last time."

Char laughed heartedly, embraced him roughly and made him swear they would stay in regular contact, "Bye, mate. Takin' yeh by word. I'll hear from yeh."

"Quit the Gutter Talk... And Char? Take care of yourself and of them too, will you?"

"You too. See you!"

One more goodbye and Harry faced King's Cross alone. With his entire luggage and a heart that wasn't quite sure whether it was exhilarated or pained, he entered the train station.

Platforms nine and ten were easily found. He'd always been able to move well at train stations, though King's Cross hadn't been belonged to his hunting ground. But it seemed to be someone else's. A teenage someone who thought he didn't notice that they'd targeted him. He shook his head over the foolishness and kept walking ahead. Though he was nearly smothered by the things he carried, they lost his trail rather quickly when he disappeared in the busy crowd. He stepped sideways for he wanted to see who'd watched him.

"I swear it, Dad. There was a boy who looked as if he was going to Hogwarts, too. He seemed to be all alone. I just wanted to ask him whether he needed help, but when I approached him, he suddenly..." It was a rather handsome young teenager about Char's age. He was tall and had expressive grey eyes. His features would refine most likely over the years.

"Disappeared? Come, Cedric. If the kid can disappear with the entire luggage, he most likely knows what he's doing," an adult next to the teenager said kindly and led his son away.

Harry watched father and son walk away and didn't know whether to smile or feel wistful. He was going to deal with a lot of 'Others' very soon. He wondered how well they'd get along.

That Cedric seemed to be nice, though.

He waited a few minutes for he didn't want to follow his former pursuers. When he arrived at platforms nine and ten, he approached the barrier which practically invited him to walk through. Without hesitating he crossed it and felt the same way he had when he'd first entered Diagon Alley.

A rush of warmth coursed through him and he relaxed immediately. He saw countless families chatting with their children who all carried the same amount of luggage, only that they additionally had to carry a cauldron. He was overwhelmed and for a second he hesitated at the barrier, which was long enough to nearly be hit by a trolley had he not jumped away in the very last second. However, the old bag he'd let go was hit and ripped open. All his clothes were scattered across the ground.

It didn't matter for the round-faced boy holding the trolley lost balance and stumbled, but Harry launched forward and grabbed his arm. Having something to hold onto, the unknown kid managed to stand straight. However, his trolley continued its journey unhindered towards another child.

"Freeze," Harry hissed sharply but quietly. Right before it hit the other boy (who looked younger than he did or the round-faced boy in front of him) the trolley stopped, but since it had taken its time Harry was unable to tell whether it had been his doing or not (he doubted it). An exasperated mother arrived and chastised the younger kid for having dared to step out of her sight.

Seeing that the younger was taken care of, he looked at the round-faced boy he'd caught. He looked rather pale and was examining the ground.

A shy one.

"Sorry," the unfamiliar boy mumbled still not looking up, "Was a little clumsy."

"Don't think about it," Harry said waving his hand as if he could push away the thought, "Both of us are at fault here. I could've stepped away after I entered the platform. Forget it." He smiled kindly and was glad that the stranger finally looked into his eyes. He was a little bit shorter and much thinner than the pale boy, but he felt strangely protective of him, though he'd never seen...

He felt a violent jolt when their eyes met. He knew that kid. He'd never seen him in his life, but somehow he was familiar.

Protectiveness suddenly intensified. Bizarrely, the stranger seemed to feel something similar for he stared back, eyes widened.

"Neville," an exasperated voice sounded behind them and the boy (Neville) suddenly seemed to shrink a little. He ducked his head and looked utterly miserable. A lady (most likely the mother) approached them. Originally, she might have been round-faced, but she looked a lot thinner these days. She wasn't a tall woman, but not short, either. Her hair was long and brown and was dressed up to a top-knot, "What are you doing? Is it impossible to leave you alone for a moment? Accio, Neville's things!" she said, drawing her wand. All of the boy's belongings, which had scattered the ground not unlike Harry's, flew towards her and she put them back into the trolley. The ground was now only covered by Harry's ripped bag and its content.

"I'm sorry, Mum," Neville muttered, once again examining the floor.

"Actually, madam, that would be my fault," Harry chimed in, unwilling to witness this scene without interfering, "I was foolish enough to stand right by the entrance. I was a bit overwhelmed with what I saw. I apologize for the inconvenience."

Her sharp, brown eyes caught his. She startled and something amazingly similar to recognition was visible in her gaze. He'd never met the woman in his entire life.

"Is it possible? Harry? Lily's son? You look just like... How?"

"You knew my mother, madam? It's very nice to meet you. Yes, I'm Harry..." But he stopped for time seemed to have frozen.

All chatter on the train station subsided. As if they hadn't talked at all, the lady turned around and walked towards the barrier. Confused, Harry looked up and saw that three other people had just entered the platform. The lady joined the group and muttered something to the arriving party absently taking her (as it seemed) husband's hand.

Whispers started to fill Harry's ears.

"It's them!"

A/N: ELEVEN reviews! Thank you so much! They were really encouraging, too, as are the numerous Story Alerts :-)

Second part is already written and being corrected by my wonderful Beta who corrected this part within less than an hour: That earns a big applause for MissGoalie75. Thank you so much! And thanks for reminding me of my mistakes :-)

I think, you all know whom Harry is going to meet in the next part...

I'm not a person to use cliffhangers very often , but funnily, I'm currently working with two chapters that ended as cliffhangers. This one and my other HP story "Finding Parental Care"... Sorry about that.

Reviews are appreciated.

Chapter 6, Part Two: The Boys Who Lived

"The Longbottoms!"

"Lacius! It's Lacius Longbottom"

"Do you see his scar?"

Harry didn't see the scar, he wasn't interested in it. Lacius Longbottom was taller than his brother and had a thin face, much more like his father. The eyes almost seemed sky-blue and he'd inherited those from the elder, elegant lady who stood behind the males.

Worriedly, he observed the boy (who'd once saved his life) in front of him. He couldn't imagine how terrible it was to be in the spotlight like that.

It had to be horrible.

He knew that one pair of eyes didn't change anything, but he wouldn't stare. Instead, he looked back at Neville who stood a bit apart from his parents, brother and most likely his grandmother. He was still watching the ground. Harry managed to catch his gaze and smiled softly. Then, he crouched to the ground and started gathering his things.

The Boy Who Lived took a step ahead ignoring the stares and walked towards the Hogwarts train. He didn't bump into Harry, but he walked carelessly across the orphan's few good clothes he possessed. The man and older lady followed him and so did the crowd's gaze.

Nobody seemed to have noticed the Boy Who Lived's rather rude behaviour.

Except for two people: his mother and his brother.

Their reactions varied. While Mrs Longbottom looked as if she wanted to reprimand him for it, but decided not to do it, Neville crouched down beside him and helped him picking up his things.

"Thanks," Harry said with a smile.

"Sorry for my brother's behaviour. He's..." He shrugged his shoulders and continued picking things up.

All of a sudden, while they were filling the bit of cloth that was left of his torn bag, Neville let everything drop.

"Trevor!"

Harry looked around expecting a friend nearby, but didn't see anyone. Everybody was fully focused on the four people walking across the platform without noticing that Neville wasn't with them.

If there was one thing Harry couldn't stand it was abandonment. He had been inclined to console friends, who simply wouldn't understand why their parents hadn't bothered to take care of them, too many times. His eyes blazed with fury.

That was until he saw utter distress on the face of his new acquaintance, "My toad. I... Where is he? He's always running away." While he spoke, Harry felt sudden heat arise next to him and therefore wasn't at all surprised when a female house-elf appeared at their side.

House-elves were particularly easy to feel. Their magic was universal. More than any other magical being he'd met so far (which included goblins, wizards, witches and bowtruckles), their magic affected their surroundings.

According to Kertak, those of Elven origin possessed magic that was related to the four elements of nature: water, earth, fire and air. That was the reason why they had a way of touching their environment when using magic. Harry, who was particularly attuned to feeling fire, therefore had no problems at detecting them.

"Kali," Neville squealed happily and panicked at the same time, but grew quiet immediately, when he saw the toad in the small elf's hands. It immediately jumped into his, "There you are, Trevor! Thank you so much, Kali." His voice held a mixture of admiration and gratitude.

Harry immediately knew that he would like this child. He turned towards the elf and said, "Kali-maco" Thereby speaking one of the few Elvish words he knew: 'greetings.'

Kali looked up at him wide-eyed, "You is speaking Elven tongue? But you has misunderstood. Maco is only said when house-elf is meeting another, sir. Wizards demeans himself speaking 'maco.'"

"I don't think I do. It is as you said. You say maco to those who are your equal. And I'm yours. My name is Harry, salà." Why did he always fall back into Gobbledegock when talking to magical beings that weren't human? He simply couldn't tell.

"salà? You is not comparing me to goblin lady, sir, insulting the ladies, you is."

"I don't think so," he replied firmly, but he smiled. He could feel Neville gape at him. Was he being impolite? He sometimes forgot that the Others were less habitual with bluntness than he was used to.

"You speak Elven language," Neville stated, completely astonished, "Kali never taught me that."

"Actually..." He grew quiet again when he saw the Boy Who Lived and Mr Longbottom arrive out of the corner of his eyes.

"Merlin, Neville!" the taller boy hissed. His voice was hushed as if he didn't want this conversation to become public, "Could you please not embarrass me, just this once? Kali, what are you doing here?"

"Kali is sorry, Master Lacijs, but Kali had..."

"Just go," he ordered, his blue eyes displayed arrogance and annoyance. With a sad look at Neville, Kali disappeared the same way she'd arrived.

It pained Harry to know that he wouldn't be able to do as Professor Dumbledore had asked him to.

He couldn't stand the kid. A fact, he knew, would get him into trouble.

His eyebrows rose, but he did not smile. A bad sign to all those who knew him.

His facial expression caught Laciuss' attention for the first time. Sky-blue met emerald green.

"My name is Laciuss Longbottom," he said importantly, his chin lifted slightly and with a short movement of his hand, the lightening scar on his forehead was in plain sight, "What's yours?"

Harry managed to suppress a snort, "Guess, you'll find that out very soon." There was a lot of power in a name. He'd lived without his last name his entire life. There was no way he'd give it away willingly to the boy in front of him.

"Sir," he said politely bowing in goblin manner to Mr Longbottom merely wishing a good day for the adult wizard had done nothing to prevent his son from doing the things he did and without caring what happened to the other.

He gave Neville another smile and before grabbing the rest of his luggage, he took his torn bag in a way its content was secured. He would repair it on the train.

Unfortunately, it hindered his movements and he might have not been able to mount the train, hadn't a red-haired boy asked whether he wanted some help.

"Yes, please," he said with a smile.

"Oy, Fred," the boy called, "C'mere and help." For a moment, he believed to see doubled for a twin arrived.

Together they got Harry's things into the train, causing the younger boy to thank them heartedly.

"No problem," the red-haired boy named Fred smiled, "First year at Hogwarts?"

He nodded in return. There was a mischievous air about the way they observed him, but they weren't malicious.

"I'm Fred Weasley," the boy that was not Fred said, "This is George, my sorry excuse of a brother."

Harry only laughed, "I'd say it's the other way around, George, but it's nice to know your name. My name's Harry, Harry Potter."

They gawped at him in utter astonishment, then, simultaneously, they laughed, clearly amused, "Wow! You've got good eyes. How did you know that?"

"You," he said, directed at George, "Called him earlier."

"Yes, but then we changed positions about seven times. How did you keep track of that?"

That was a rather strange question. Yes, they looked alike, but George's voice was slightly higher and Fred moved a bit more steadily on his feet than George. All you had to do was observe.

"Fred? George? Are you there?" A female voice came floating in through the train's open door.

"Coming, Mum," they chorused, "It was nice meeting you, Harry," Fred added. A moment later, they hopped off the train. Shaking his head a little, he sought an empty compartment and slid it open as soon as he found it. Carefully, he stocked his things, extracted One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi and a bit of thread including a needle.

He started repairing his ragged bag. He might be able to seal it, but it wouldn't look very professional.

It didn't matter. It had to hold together, that was all.

Suddenly, he felt the train leave and stopped a moment to look outside. Parents and younger siblings were standing by the platform waving goodbye. He thought of Char and smiled. He knew that Kertak and Char both would be sitting somewhere watching the clock turn eleven.

Before he could dwell on the thought, his compartment slid open and Neville entered. He stopped dead, when he saw him. Apparently, he'd thought that the compartment was empty.

His brother wasn't with him, but that didn't surprise Harry. Laciussurely hadn't sounded as if he were George Weasley's Fred or the other way around. Laciussurely and Neville might be twin brothers, but they neither looked the same nor were their characters alike.

Harry knew without doubt whom he liked better.

"Hello! Nice to see you again," he spoke calmly and avoided any kind of rash movement. He knew shy kids well enough to know that he would be spooked otherwise, but that was the last thing he wanted.

"lo," the boy whispered, looking to the ground.

"Come, sit down, please." Neville did as he was told and settled by the window facing Harry. When their eyes met again, that inexplicable feeling of knowing each other came back.

Of course, he'd met him.

Apparently, the Longbottoms had been friends with the Potters and both of them had been there that night his parents were murdered (it would also explain Mrs Longbottom's reaction), but he'd been one year old. He couldn't elucidate how it was possible to remember that.

"Do I know you?" It seemed as if Neville was wondering the same.

Harry freely gave him his name (causing a startled reaction from the timid boy) and told him that they'd met as toddlers and they'd been in the same room the night Voldemort had entered Godric's Hollow.

"...When Laciussurely saved us all," Neville whispered. His voice was soft and insecure, the brown eyes subdued, "Mum and Father told us that there'd been another child in the room, but they'd never gotten into detail. I think it pains them... Your parents were good friends of them."

"That explains it," Harry stated, though it didn't really explain much. The story behind the Longbottoms seemed to be longer and darker than they'd earlier shown in public.

"What happened to you? After, I mean," it was a personal topic, but since Neville finally took heart and asked a question of his own, Harry couldn't bring himself to point out just how personal the question was.

"I lived with my aunt first, but she died in an accident. I was brought to an orphanage shortly after." He did his best not to sound too indifferent without breaking in the process. As he feared, the timid boy's eyes widened.

"I'm sorry, I didn't..."

"Don't apologize unless it's your fault," Harry spoke a sentence he'd said a hundred times in the course of his life.

"But it was rude," much more vehemently than any other word he'd spoken so far, "Sorry," he said, this time apologizing for he'd noticed the short boy's surprised reaction.

"Don't be," Harry smiled, "It's good to stand up for what we believe." For the first time, Neville smiled back. He couldn't explain it. Being near Harry was... safe.

The compartment slid open and a dark-haired, for his age rather lean, kid entered. Harry guessed him their age.

Not unlike Neville, he stopped at the entrance. His eye-colour was hard to describe, somewhat green-brown with a peck of blue. The pair looked into emerald and Harry knew that this kid had seen someone die, someone he cared about. This kind of expression you only wore when you'd lost someone.

Apart from that, there was bright and uncontained intelligence blazing in the depth of those eyes.

Recognition dawned the stranger as well.

"We don't bite," Harry stated with a smirk tilting his head a little, "Come on, join us. There is enough space for everybody."

"I'd rather be alone," the child's voice cracked a little as if talking wasn't his favourite activity.

"We won't bother you, then," Harry immediately accepted, but moved a bit to the side to invite him. He focused back on Neville and asked him whether he had any older siblings that had gone to Hogwarts, which was negated instantly.

"When have you heard of your magical inheritance, then?" The timid boy suddenly bloomed at the idea of having met someone that displayed the basic courtesy of noticing him.

"I kind of stumbled upon Diagon Alley when I was around six. There, I made acquaintance with someone who's one of my best friends, these days," he disliked being forced to describe the relationship he had to Kertak. He was his brother, but saying that always demanded clarification, "But I didn't think I was magical enough, despite what he kept telling me. So, it was last month, when I learnt for sure. When the letter arrived."

"What's it like living among Muggles?" Harry noticed out of the corners of his eyes that the stranger approached them and sat down beside him. He extracted a book, *Magical Theory*, and started to read, or at least, he pretended to for he was listening with half an ear.

"That's a hard question to answer. I've seen great people and I've met horrible people. Since I live at a wonderful place these days with twenty other kids and two excellent caretakers, I can tell that they, at least, are good people."

Again, it was inadequate, but he hoped that his facial expression showed just how 'good' they were.

"My name's Theodore Nott," the stranger spoke all of a sudden. His eyes were fixed on the orphan, only occasionally they slid over to Neville. He extracted his hand and Harry took it.

He'd have to get used to that custom. Oh, he touched people he didn't know, but the shaking of hands wasn't something he did often.

"Harry Potter." Curtly, Theodore nodded, let go of his hand and offered his own to Neville who took it, suddenly feeling a bit timid again.

"Neville Longbottom." Eyebrows rose and Harry could swear he'd heard Neville sigh a little, "He's my brother."

That had to be hard. Well, at least he was at Hogwarts now. Neville would find friends that weren't at all interested in his famous brother. Theodore seemed to have noticed the exasperation for his eyebrows fell and he took a good look at the timid boy in front of him. Harry was glad to see that he softened a little.

All of a sudden, the tallest boy of the group retreated and said he'd continue reading.

"We won't stop you," Harry commented good-humouredly. Theodore Nott seemed like the type whom you could sit close to for hours without speaking a single word.

Good company.

Neville asked him (looking rather worried) how much he'd studied. He was able to calm him by saying that he'd hardly found time. While Neville told him that he'd been studying quite a bit ever since the letter had arrived, Harry noticed that Theodore kept reading the same page for nearly ten minutes before he put it away. He didn't join their conversation actively, but he listened to them more openly now.

Again the compartment opened and two other figures entered. It was a boy and a girl. Latter looked large and square with a heavy jaw, but her eyes glimmered with amusement when she looked at her company causing Harry to smile. The boy's skin was dark, he had dark-brown eyes and he contrasted the girl with his rather refined features. Given a few years time and he'd become a rather handsome young man. When they looked at them, both looked surprised.

"Sorry, we'll just go look for another place," the boy said, but before Harry could say anything, Neville chimed in.

"No, it's fine. We'll manage. Come in." What followed was a rather crowded compartment, but somehow they managed to squeeze in and store the entire luggage. Harry immediately felt at home. They introduced themselves and so they got acquainted with Blaise Zabini and Millicent Bulstrode.

"Are you brother and sister?" Harry asked, causing the entire apartment to look at him, "I mean... Sorry, did you grow up together?"

"Yes, we did, next to each other, really," Blaise explained. Millicent seemed to be a lot more timid, "Mill's mum's my aunt, my father's twin, really. But you're right, we're closer than most cousins are."

Harry smiled and they exchanged brief information. An hour later, all of them knew he was an orphan, but somehow he didn't mind. Especially since Theodore had started opening up a little bit, though he still didn't talk much.

Theo (he'd shortened the name out of habit, but fortunately, he hadn't minded) seemed to understand him best (He lived with his father, but hadn't said a word about the mother. With a bang, Harry had realized whom he'd watched dying. He hadn't said anything, though, and he wouldn't pry, either).

It wasn't as dreadful as he'd thought it would be talking to the Others. They were children, not unlike his friends at St Mary's were.

They were just talking about their first bursts of magic, when the compartment door opened a forth time.

Harry was about to ask whether there was a shield outside saying 'Come in. Infinite space available!', when he saw that the bushy-haired girl (who already wore her Hogwarts attire) was crying. Before anybody was able to ask what was wrong, he was at her side.

"Hush," he murmured quietly laying his arm around her shoulder, "It's okay. Hush." Warmth spread and she relaxed a little.

"What's up?" Blaise asked, eyebrows furrowed with worry.

Slowly the sobs subsided and she explained, "Lacius Longbottom," Neville flinched, "I said that I knew who he was and he'd just smirked saying that the entire world knew who he was. I said that I knew what books he was in and he quoted them all. Then, he slammed the compartment door in my face. A blond boy, who sat in his compartment, murmured 'Muggleborn.' I know it doesn't mean

anything, but they'd sounded so condescending..." Another sob and she hid her face in Harry's shoulder.

He was furious. Locius Longbottom had just managed to aggravate him three times within very few hours. Given how patient he was, that was a feat not many managed.

Those who did, well... He definitely wouldn't be able to verify the headmaster's hopes.

"Come in," he said, but when he turned around it was clear that one of them wouldn't be able to sit. There wasn't enough space.

"Maybe I shouldn't," the unknown girl said, but Millicent interrupted her saying that they'd find a way. Harry inspected the compartment. The seats couldn't be tilted back unless they loosed some of the screws.

"Step back." All of them did as they were told. He grabbed into his bag and extracted an old pocket-knife. Quickly and without making a sound, Harry loosened the screws, enabling him to tilt back the seats. So they wouldn't be falling back down, he secured them by fixing it to pipe-like constructions at the wall with the thread he'd earlier used to repair his bag.

All looked at him in astonishment.

"Sit down," he said with a smile and carefully tucked the unfamiliar girl's arm leading her to the ground, "Imagine it as a picnic." Theo was the last who sat down, but not out of dislike more out of sheer bewilderment.

"I apologize for Locius," Neville murmured, not looking at the girl. She seemed rather confused which was why he explained, "He's my brother."

Angrily, she stared at him and Harry was afraid she'd say something scathing to Neville who hadn't done anything. He wanted to interfere, when she took a shuddering breath and said firmly, "Don't apologize for something you didn't do. Your brother was being mean, yes, but that's not your fault."

Harry smiled appreciatively. Now that she slowly stopped being upset, her teary eyes revealed a rather sharp mind.

"Harry Potter," he said and thereby caused yet another introduction. The bushy-haired girl was called Hermione Granger, she was (as that blond-haired boy had noticed) a Muggleborn, but it took less than ten minutes to know that this girl knew more than most whose parents were magical.

"There is so much to learn," once Hermione had lost her shyness, she spoke so fast it took Harry's full concentration to keep up, "Do you know what house you'll be in? Well, we don't know, of course. Personally, I hope for Gryffindor, it is said Professor Dumbledore himself had been there, but Ravenclaw wouldn't be bad either." When she'd said Gryffindor he noticed that Millicent, Theo and Blaise tensed up a bit and before anything could be said, he asked.

"Does it matter? Would it matter to you personally for our friendship, or oncoming friendship for I don't have the arrogance to state we know each other well enough to be friends. Does it matter what houses we enter?"

Surprised, she looked at him, "No, of course not. Why would it?" Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw three of the four others relax.

"Slytherin," Millicent stated clearly. She noticed Neville's eyes widen and said, "It's got a bad reputation, but cunning is a good character trait to have. To think before you act. My entire family was there." Blaise confirmed and added, "We don't name him, either, Neville. He Who Must Not Be Named might have been a Slytherin, but he is not accepted by our folks, not even close."

Harry looked up in surprise, "Voldemort was at Hogwarts?" The entire compartment flinched heavily. It was as if saying 'Sullivan' around those who'd been to Hell.

And they said that non-magical and magical folk were different...

"Don't speak his name," Theo said speaking for the first time since he'd mentioned that he lived at home with his father (He definitely wasn't a very chatty person). His eyes widened in sheer fear, "Don't."

"I didn't mean to scare you," Harry replied, "But he killed my parents. He's the last person in the world who has the right to control me that way. By not saying his name, I give him a weapon, in his book, I show respect. That is the last thing he earned."

Utter silence followed that statement. Theo looked at him for a long time before he nodded, "What house do you want to be in?" Obviously, he had to think of the matter before he spoke of it again. The change of topic was accepted rather freely.

"I don't know." Harry thought it sounded better than 'There is still a chance they say that there must have been made a mistake and he wouldn't fit into any house.'

Since none of them had older siblings, they didn't know much about the classes that would follow, though Neville, Blaise and Millicent knew for example the names of the teachers. Apparently, the Head of the Slytherin House was called Professor Snape and he was also the Potions professor, while Professor McGonagall, the deputy headmistress, was the Transfiguration teacher and Head of the Gryffindor House. They continued exchanging the knowledge they'd acquired concerning Hogwarts (Hermione had read and seemingly learned by heart a book that was called Hogwarts, a History and she knew quite a lot about the castle). Blaise once exclaimed that she was, without doubt, one of the best-informed and smartest witches who'd ever entered the castle.

She blushed at that statement.

A smiling, dimpled lady opened the compartment and wanted to say something when she looked at the seats.

"What, in Merlin's name, have you been doing?" she asked sternly, her arms rested on her hips. Harry immediately got up and showed her the screws in his hands.

"Nothing that cannot be repaired. We've just met and wanted to spend the journey together, but we lacked in space. I'll be fixing it as soon as we arrive," he assured her. The witch examined him for a moment and then asked whether they wanted something off the trolley. Harry looked at the sweets. The last time he'd eaten chocolate was three months ago, when Johnny had turned ten years old. Sister Margret had baked a gigantic cake for all of them. He did

wonder what the sweets tasted like, but chose against it for he wasn't quite sure how many expenses would come up in the course of the year.

He'd eaten at five, which would be enough for the rest of the day. He'd endured worse.

Blaise and Millicent didn't seem to think so for they bought enough food for all of them. The Chocolate Frogs were fun, but he was much more interested in the cards than the chocolate.

Morgana, Merlin, Circe and Paracelsus. It was interesting to read what they'd done according to the magical world.

These cards said that Morgana was great and strong sorceress that had helped King Arthur but had fallen into disgrace when the church had proclaimed all magic to be work of the devil.

Paracelsus had been a great Potions Master and healer. To acquire the Medal of Paracelsus was the biggest honour a brewer was able to receive. There was still a hidden institute in Salzburg (the Austrian city where he'd died) that offered education to acquire Mastership in Potions.

"You should put on your cloaks," Hermione said who'd left the compartment a few minutes earlier, "We'll be arriving very soon."

Harry and Neville, who were the only ones that still wore their normal attire, complied and grabbed their cloaks. When he felt the additional piece of clothing around him, he suddenly got nervous again.

He had no idea what the future was going to bring. He'd found new friends whose characters varied about as much as they had at St Mary's... He'd officially entered the magical world when he'd mounted that train.

What would Hogwarts be like? He hoped the castle would welcome an unimportant orphan with the same warmth it seemed to have welcomed a gigantic man with the name Hagrid and a powerful but kind wizard such as Professor Dumbledore.

'Hogwarts, please offer me a home, not mere shelter!'

Not too many miles away, a thousand year old building glowed, happily awaiting her children.

A/N: I'm sitting at my computer with a fever and a cough, so I'm sorry if my author's note sounds a little strange. Since English isn't my first language you might understand why.

Thank you very much for the reviews! Thanks to MissGoalie75 for correcting this chapter so quickly.

For those who like reading but not writing in English, here's this: My first language is German, so you could write your opinion in German or Swiss German (ausser, wenn ihr aus dem Wallis seid, dann tut es mir leid ;-)) My Italian isn't great, but basic vocabulary I do understand.

Reviews will help me recover a lot faster ;-) So, please, send me reviews!

Finally, next chapter they'll be arriving at Hogwarts...

Next Chapter: The Sorting Hat

Chapter 7, Part One: The Sorting Hat

"We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes' time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately," a voice echoed through the train.

Nervousness touched the entire compartment. They stood up and Blaise looked around with his eyebrows furrowed.

"You go ahead," Harry said reaching into his pocket extracting the screws and the old knife, "I'll take care of this." Hesitantly they left but not without offering help.

"I've repaired more complicated things," Harry said while removing the threads thereby he was able to put the seats down, "I'll be with you in a moment."

When the compartment door closed, Harry put the screws back into place as swiftly as he had removed them a couple of hours earlier. He was almost finished when he heard someone approach. The person tried to be unseen, but they definitely weren't used to secrecy. Harry could sense no danger which was why he didn't look up.

It was the lady from earlier. With a sharp eye she surveyed the compartment, still in the wrong belief that he hadn't heard her.

"As promised, everything is back into place, madam," He looked up and she flinched, obviously not having expected him to notice her presence. What was it with the Others? Didn't they pay attention to their surroundings at all?

He stood up, wished her a nice day, while walking past her with a smile.

To his surprise, the entire group had been waiting not too far away. He joined them and they continued with their conversation that had been about bursts of accidental magic.

Apparently, Neville had been thought to be a squib until he was eight while his brother had started showing first bursts of magic at the age of three (never to mention what had happened when he'd been a year old).

That had to be tough, but Neville just seemed to be glad that he'd been invited to Hogwarts. Harry could relate to that feeling very well.

While Blaise had shown first bursts at four, it had taken Millicent two more years, but having very supportive parents it hadn't been very stressful, but apparently it wasn't a good sign when nothing happened until the age of five.

Squibs were rare, but it was a harsh fate for those who were.

Hermione had been forced to deal with strange happenings when she turned four. Her parents hadn't known what was going on and all of them had been glad when they'd finally had an explanation for Hermione's bursts when she'd been emotionally upset as a child. It had taken some time until the information sunk in, though, especially when her parents had realized that she most likely wouldn't ever go to university.

"But you can acquire Mastership in certain subjects," Millicent chimed in, "They take years, but after graduation at Hogwarts your education doesn't have to be completed. Not necessarily." A piece of information that seemed to delight Hermione.

"What about you, Harry?" The boy with the emerald eyes looked at Theo. The quiet, young boy seemed to have taken a keen interest on him. Whenever he'd opened his mouth to voice a question, it had been directed at him and no one else.

Oh, he'd spoken to the others, but never asked questions. Harry wondered what it was about.

He liked Theo's ways for he seemed rather grown up which wasn't a surprise considering he'd most likely lost his mother.

Judging by the expression in his eyes, he'd lost her years ago.

The raw pain was gone, what was left was a dull ache that would never go away completely. Harry had seen that expression before, dozens of times.

"What do you mean?"

"Accidental magic. When have you started?"

Right. The emotional magic burst thing. He'd had one (apart from those few times he'd nearly let bricks burst when he was agitated). Everything else had been a question of consciousness.

"My magic once saved me when I was around two. Other than that I've never been able to access magic unconsciously."

That statement was followed by complete silence. Harry looked at Theo's frozen face, "You okay? You look a little pale."

"Conscious... What kind?" The question was meant to be asked indifferently, collected. He'd have succeeded, hadn't his voice given away a slight tremor.

"Er... You know, things like... making a flower bloom and... Well, what Neville said about falling... I fell off a rooftop once," he'd been pushed off it, but that was another story, "Unlike Neville I had to slow the fall consciously and then land, it's kind of like imagining yourself as a cat, really. Theo? You sure you're okay? If you were pale before, you look kind of ashen now."

If he was honest, Blaise and Millicent, who'd been overhearing the conversation, looked kind of pale, too. Neville and Hermione looked up from their conversation at the sudden silence.

"Merlin," Blaise muttered, "Harry, well, I've heard of blooming flowers, but the latter... That's impressive. Consciously?"

"Okay, am I missing something?" Harry asked feeling confused, "What's more difficult, conscious or unconscious magic?"

"Conscious, of course," Millicent said looking rather incredulous, "Harry, what do you think Hogwarts is for? So we can control our magic and use it consciously. How can you not know this? You said that you've known about the magical world for quite a while."

'I beg your pardon?' the boy's raised eyebrows clearly stated. So, he'd been doing it right? He'd not expected that. "Yes, I do, but not through wizards or witches. I don't know that much about the magic of wand-carriers. Only what..."

Did he really just say 'wand-carriers'? He'd been spending far too much time with Kertak. Puzzled faces looked back at him.

"It's kind of a long story," Harry said suppressing a wince, "Let's just say that my magical pre-school education cannot be called conventional."

Millicent looked rather dubious, then, she grinned, "Can't wait to hear that story."

Blaise laughed at, Neville looked speechless and curious at the same time, Hermione seemed intrigued and Theo... Theodore observed him as if he was a particularly fascinating plant.

Another compartment door opened and three red-heads left it accompanied by a kid with dreadlocks. Two of the red-heads he already knew.

"Fred, George, nice to see you again," Harry said with a smile. He looked over to the youngest of the group (undoubtedly Fred's and George's brother).

"Oh, hello, mystery boy who can tell us apart," Fred and George said simultaneously. They turned to the younger red-head, "This is Ron, our little brother. It's his first year as well." Harry looked at Ron ('little brother' didn't quite fit for he was quite a bit taller than Harry) and smiled. Ron nodded curtly in return, but Harry didn't think it was impertinence for he held eye-contact for a moment before examining the ground. Char was a bit like that when he met new people. Completely incapable of opening his mouth at first, "And this is Lee Jordan, we're entering our third year at Hogwarts."

"How'd you do?" Lee said in mocking formality and bowed.

Harry tried, he really tried not to laugh, but it was impossible. As soon as he regained control he introduced Hermione, Millicent, Neville, Blaise and Theodore to the rest.

"What was so funny?" Lee asked, a bit puzzled. He'd meant to act a little over the top, but he couldn't figure out for the world why this kid would suddenly have a laughing fit.

"Do yourself a favour? Never ever bow like this in the presence of a goblin."

The grin was wiped off the twins' and Lee's faces.

"Why? What would they do?" They'd all heard of what some goblins were capable of. You didn't have to pay attention in Professor Binn's class to know what they'd done in the past.

"They'd have a really nasty laughing fit." Everybody stared at him, "Seriously. You see, whenever goblins bow it has a meaning. It's about as important as talking itself. I've not even scratched the surface with the things I know. As far as I was told, in times of war bows were used for communication. Usually, that isn't a problem for wa...wizards and witches bow rather differently than goblins, so it means either gibberish or nothing at all. What you 'said' with your bow though was 'Look out' 'dangerous' and 'pixies'. So, yes, they would have a laughing fit. It could be taken as insult, but most goblins are far too clever to take a wizard's bow seriously."

The train slowly came to a stop and Harry was glad about it. He hadn't even arrived at Hogwarts and he was already causing awkward silences.

'Harry, yeh're one o'the best people I know, but strangers, 'specially the Others, can feel slightly intimidated by you.' Until today, Harry had never really thought about it. They didn't seem to be frightened, just stunned.

As they left the train, Fred grinned at the future First Years, "We've got to go that way. See you at the Sorting." he said, then walked alongside his twin brother and Lee towards multiple carriages that seemed to be pulled by... thestrals! Harry nearly shouted it, but was distracted when he heard a familiar voice calling, "Firs'-years! Firs'-years over here!" Harry whirled his head around and immediately recognized the gigantic man.

He approached him with a smile.

"All right there, Harry?" The man said crouching down a little so he could meet the young boy's eyes.

"Yes, thanks, Hagrid. How are you?"

"Another school year begins. Nothin' better than that," Hagrid's beard curled into a smile in return. Then he spoke louder, "Any more firs'-years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

They followed Hagrid, constantly slipping and stumbling (Neville refused to let go off Harry's shoulder as they descended). Harry took a glance around.

Everybody looked pale and nervous, Laciús included. Their eyes met and the Boy Who Lived's eyes narrowed when he saw that the impertinent little brat from earlier was steadying his clumsy brother.

That was his job. Since he had enough trouble keeping steady on his feet alone, he decided it wasn't a good idea to point that out, though.

"Yeh'll get yer firs' sight of Hogwarts in a sec," Hagrid called over his shoulder, "jus' round this bend here."

What followed, was a loud exclamation of amazement chorused by almost fifty children.

Harry was completely silent. He hadn't exclaimed. He stared at the vast castle atop a high mountain on the other side of the great black lake.

He couldn't speak, even if he wanted to. He'd seen Diagon Alley, he'd been inside the Tosa Lei and had seen Gringott's vaults which were protected by powerful goblin magic. But this school... It was evening and it wasn't very warm for September (he briefly wondered where they were), but Harry felt the warmth of magic wrapping around them like a worried mother putting an extra-layer of clothing around their children.

There was no way this castle was built by four wizards and witches alone, there was too much magic, too many variations. He could swear that there was Elven and goblin magic mingled with it.

Harry wondered how anybody could believe it was the mere deed of wizards and witches. For the first time, he truly understood the derisive tone Kertak sometimes used when it came to wand-carriers.

Despite his dark thoughts, he had to smile. Hogwarts wouldn't provide him shelter. She'd give him a home.

"No more'n four to a boat," Hagrid's deep voice shook him out of his musings and he noticed the little fleet of small boats sitting in the water by the shore.

Harry stiffened. He couldn't swim.

Not a big surprise for a kid of London's streets, but right now he realized the inconvenience of it. If he fell into that water...

It was cold and dark and deep.

Involuntarily, he took a step back bumping into Ron who looked at him.

"You okay?"

"Fine," he managed to say, but he sounded hoarse, his eyes quickly surveyed the water. He was so absorbed by what was ahead of him, he flinched horribly when he felt a stranger's hand on his shoulder.

He exhaled in relief when he noticed, it was Blaise. He'd almost...

"Come," Blaise said softly. He knew that Harry came from an orphanage in London. It was only logical that he never learnt to swim.

Hagrid's 'No more'n four to a boat!' left Blaise with a bit of a conflict.

Theodore, Hermione and Millicent already sat in a boat, Blaise of course, had meant to stay with his best friend and cousin, but felt bad about leaving Harry alone.

Harry noticed that of course, "Go," he still sounded hoarse, "I'll manage. Go on! Maybe you can corrupt Hermione to become a Slytherin." He grinned a little, his troubled eyes displaying the faint impression of mischief. Blaise laughed in return and followed Harry's words.

Neville (who'd earlier been supported by Harry) and Ron led the shorter kid into another boat. The moment Harry entered it, though

(with knees that felt rather unsteady) two boys that weren't Ron or Neville entered it so forcefully, it started to become unsteady (even less steady than boats generally were) and Harry closed his eyes in fear holding onto the wooden boat as his life depended on it. His fingers turned almost as white as his face.

"What is it, mate?" A boy with an Irish accent asked him, "You look pale."

"For Merlin's sake," Ron cursed under his breath wondering for a moment how anyone could not notice that Harry seemed to panic at the thought of even getting close to deep water. Quickly, he moved forward thereby causing his knees and all layers of clothing and shoes up to that part of anatomy to become soaking wet and tore the boat back to shore. He gestured Neville to jump in, who merely looked at him wide-eyed, "He's just met me. We haven't exchanged more than a short greeting with each other. He's met you on the Hogwarts train. I'm pretty sure he'll prefer your company."

"That's not necessary, let's find a boat for the three of us," a voice beside him said, much more calmly than its owner had looked seconds earlier. Ron and Neville both flinched.

That kid moved like a bloody ghost! Fortunately, they did find a boat that was only occupied by one child. The all three of them entered.

Harry tensed again, completely unable to speak. So it was Neville who introduced them. The girl's name was Lisa Turpin.

As Hagrid ordered the little fleet of boats to move, Harry couldn't bring himself to open his eyes again. Not even to take another look at the amazing castle.

He hated deep waters... He hated them so much for he was completely powerless when it came to them. A few minutes of children expressing their amazement passed, while Harry simply tried to be unseen. But there was not shadow, nothing to slip into, not in a confined place like a boat on a lake.

"Heads down!" Hagrid yelled and Harry opened his eyes all of a sudden. The cliffs were coming closer and Harry did as Hagrid told bending his head together with the rest of the First Years as they

were carried through a curtain of ivy which hid a wide opening in the cliff face.

Underneath the castle, there was a harbour. Undoubtedly, Harry was one of the first on solid ground, though their boat hadn't arrived first.

"Yeh're alright, Harry?" Hagrid asked looking a little worried.

"Yes, just can't ... I don't like boats very much," Harry explained. Hagrid looked at him kindly before he started checking whether everybody was accounted for.

Theo, Hermione, Millicent and Blaise joined them as soon as the all of them were out of the boats. Harry glanced down at Ron's soaking wet boots. Before he could say anything about it, Hagrid told them to follow him.

As they crowded in front of a huge, oak front door, the gigantic wizard knocked three times.

Minerva McGonagall, having awaited the cue, swung the door open. With a quick glance she surveyed the new group of First Years...

Another Weasley (Oh, please, let him not be as much of a troublemaker as the older twins!)

Ah, Miss Granger, Mr Thomas, Mr Finch-Fletchley, all the Muggleborns she'd introduced to the Magical World.

There he was, Laci Longbottom (he could not be mistaken for the scar on his forehead was unique in itself) talking to a girl she didn't know. Not afar from him was young Mr Malfoy. He looked like a much younger version of his father.

She'd taught him, too and briefly wondered whether the son was just as conceited yet highly adept the way his father was before him.

Speaking of genetics and aptitude...

She wondered how talented he was at transfiguration. His father had been a unique talent, incredibly smart too. She managed not to let

her stern mask slip, but, in the name of Merlin, what had the boy done to his glasses?

They were gone!

Lily's eyes stared back at her, unhindered, with that same careful smile she'd worn the first evening at Hogwarts.

She'd have to tell Severus as soon as possible. She'd heard things shatter in Albus' office when he'd told the younger man that Harry Potter was still alive.

She wasn't that cruel and let him deal with Lily's eyes without warning.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

She pulled the door s open and brought them to the small chamber off the hall where she held her traditional speech concerning the Sorting. When she saw Mr Weasley grow paler and paler she wondered, what in the name of Merlin, his brothers had told him.

As she left again, she quickly took another corridor that would lead her to the entrance into the Great Hall, but not through the main entrance. She opened the door that was close to the staff table, entered, approached the headmaster and quietly told him that the children were here. He nodded, his eyes glimmering the way they always did when another school year was about to start.

She was about to leave again, when she suddenly halted and turned back to Albus, "Harry's not wearing glasses anymore." She took a quick glance at Severus and turned around hoping that her old friend would be preparing the Potions Master.

As she walked back, she noticed that the ghosts just left the room again. They had so much fun doing this.

Every year.

She'd been a First Year herself as they did it, Albus confirmed that it hadn't been different in his first year, either.

That casual appearance ('Oh, new students?'), as if they didn't know exactly what day it was and that this room was reserved for the First Years. However, they were as much part of the Sorting ceremony as the Sorting itself.

They all looked terrified as she led them to the Great Hall. They always did.

She remembered how nervous she'd been herself when she'd had to walk through the hall past all these older children... She'd nearly laughed at the Hat when he'd told her that she was courageous.

She took a glance back and saw that many children's jaws had dropped. Well, whose hadn't when they'd seen the Great Hall for the first time? As she placed the traditional four-legged stool in front of the First Years, she quickly got their attention again.

As the hat sung his new song she surveyed them once again before she unrolled her scroll and started to call the names.

"What house do you want to be in?" Ron asked Neville and Harry. ("Brown, Lavendar" became the new Gryffindor). Neville spoke his choice, but cut off immediately when he heard 'Bulstrode, Millicent.'

Pale as death, Millicent approached the hat and put it on.

"SLYTHERIN!" Harry clapped his hands with a smile. She'd hoped so much for that house.

When 'Finnegan, Seamus' was called upon the platform, Harry recognized him to be the kid who'd asked him what was wrong when he'd nearly panicked on that boat.

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Ah, the House of bravery.

"Granger, Hermione!"

It took a moment before the hat decided where to put her, before it screamed, "GRYFFINDOR!"

Quickly, he glanced over at the Slytherin table where Millicent clapped her hands, unlike anybody near her.

Harry looked up in surprise when he heard the name Malfoy and somehow didn't doubt a relation to the man he'd met at Gringotts. If his experience with rich, influential people was anything to go by, he would be just as insufferable as his father.

It took another few names, then, Professor McGonagall said, "Longbottom, Laciuz."

At first, there was silence before whispers started to fill the hall.

Laciuz, a bit paler than he'd looked this morning, sat on the stool and put on the hat. For a moment, nothing happened.

Everybody watched. Then Harry could see Laciuz argue with the hat and wondered what was going on.

"GRYFFINDOR!" The hat screamed and Ron grabbed his arm, "Have you seen that? Laciuz Longbottom's in Gryffindor! That's fantastic! My entire family was there. Merlin, I hope I'll be there, too." Harry couldn't very well say that he couldn't care less about the house Laciuz had been chosen to.

He felt a little bad for Neville who'd been called next.

It took a long while before the hat decided and the orphan didn't know what to hope for his new-found friend: family tradition or distance to his famous brother.

"GRYFFINDOR!" Neville ran off still wearing the hat and had to bring it back, his face red with shame. Laciuz looked furious.

As Theo was called and placed into Slytherin, Harry suddenly realized how the people he'd met started to split up. He merely hoped they wouldn't split apart over that.

"Hey," Blaise, who'd been giving applause to Theo's place in Slytherin, whispered, "Remember? It doesn't matter. Not that much."

When Harry looked at the four separate tables, he was afraid that it did matter.

It mattered a great deal.

He must have said it aloud for he felt a familiar hand on his shoulder (It was strange that it had already become familiar, after all it was only the second time).

"We'll make it work," the tall boy said confidently, "You made that compartment fit for the six of us. We'll simply do the same with Hogwarts."

Harry smiled, but it was wiped off his face, when he heard, "Potter, Harry!"

He stepped forward and was glad the stool was there for he was too nervous to stand.

As he put on the hat, he heard a small voice in his ear, "Hmm. Difficult. Very difficult. My goodness, boy, what you've seen, most would not in a lifetime," oh, he'd heard that one before, "They all would've fought for you, but Rowena and Salazar would've stepped away for though you have a good mind, it isn't your ambition to become the greatest, is it? But you do want to make your family proud... Hm, courage, hard work and loyalty above all else, though. Godric would've found quite an adversary in Helga for she would have fought tooth and nail to get you. Tell me... A friend is wounded, the battle ahead. Would you retreat to heal or head for combat?" Harry rose his eyebrows at the question, "I don't care about fights, I prefer not to have them."

"So shall it be... HUFFLEPUFF! Go, little badger with a lions' heart ... Oh, the all of you shall see."

Harry took off the hat, looked back at Blaise and Ron, who seemed a bit stunned. However, both of them started clapping their hands as Harry walked towards the Hufflepuff table. Hermione and Neville both winked at him and gave heart-felt applause, so did Theo and Millicent from the other side of the room. Relieved and unable to keep himself from grinning, he sat down at one of the empty seats.

"Don't I know you?" An older student asked whom Harry recognized as the boy who'd wanted to help him at King's Cross.

Harry grinned, "'Know' would be slightly exaggerated, Cedric, for you didn't manage to catch me."

"How do you know my name?" Astonished, grey eyes observed him.

"You want to be unseen, become invisible... Or stay out of the bloody light.' It's a rule I grew up with. First lesson to secrecy is to stick to shadows."

He wanted to say more, but it was Ron's turn. As he'd hoped, he was in Gryffindor. Quickly he ran to the table, sat in between his brothers (there was fourth red-head who seemed to be another... Weasley. He'd just heard it, their family name was Weasley) and Neville. Hermione sat on the other side of the table. Laci was a few seats away from them talking to Seamus Finnegan and a boy called Dean Thomas.

"Zabini, Blaise!"

Harry looked up again and glanced over to the Slytherin table where Millicent had both of her fingers crossed.

"SLYTHERIN!" Millicent had already jumped up at 'Slyth-' and was on her way to hug her 'brother' when a stern-looking girl with a badge on her chest caught her. Her demeanour reminded him of Alex.

Blaise quickly approached Millicent and they hugged. It all happened so quickly, Harry was sure he was the only person who'd seen it.

After the deputy headmistress removed hat and stool, Albus Dumbledore got to his feet. His arms were opened wide and he was beaming at them with an expression indicating that there was nothing more pleasing than seeing the.

"Welcome!" he said, "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!"

"Thank you!"

As the room started clapping and cheering, Harry shook his head deeply amused. There was a thin line between brilliance and

madness, but the headmaster enjoyed making fun of that line as it seemed.

Harry's mouth fell open when the dishes arrived. Never had he seen so much food... The orphanage could live off this mountain of food for an entire month!

He definitely wouldn't starve here.

Carefully he took some potatoes, meat and fresh vegetables for the latter two he couldn't eat regularly at St Mary's due to prizes. He wouldn't be able to eat this much at first. His stomach wouldn't take it well.

As he ate, he longingly looked from one side of the room to the other.

"Everything okay?"

"I guess," Harry murmured at Cedric's question, "It's just... We've met a few hours ago, and the group is already confined into three separate places... Do you have a lot of friends outside of Hufflepuff?"

"Not that many, but you'll get to meet the others enough." Harry had to suppress a laugh at the choice of words.

The others... An 'Other' was explaining him about the others whom he'd chosen as potential friends.

"Justin Finch-Fletchley," a boy, who was facing him, introduced himself. Harry caught his gaze and gave his name freely as well. By that, the entire Hufflepuff table introduced itself and Harry couldn't help but smile.

He'd find friends here... Their welcome was heart-felt and their delight honest. It was just hard that the first friends he'd chosen couldn't be with him at dinner.

As Justin explained that he was a Muggleborn who'd almost gotten a place at Eton (Harry's eyes had widened at that. His pitiful writing skills had led to the point his teachers didn't even let him apply to that school.) and that his mother hadn't been too thrilled at first, Harry suddenly felt eyes surveying him.

He snapped his head around and glimpsed back at the Staff Table. A hooked-nosed teacher with greasy, black hair and sallow skin was watching him.

Their eyes met and Harry had the urge to run.

That was a person he had not intention to meddle with.

Not that he was a person like Sullivan, not at all. Well, not even Sullivan had looked like Sullivan, at first. However, Harry would bet on his life that this tall man wasn't anything like the man who'd made four years of life literal hell.

He didn't want to run because of that.

The wizard who sat only a few seats away from Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore was another type of man.

That person who always was one step ahead of you. He would grab your wrist before you could reach into his pocket, and yet you could've sworn he'd never seen it coming.

Those dark eyes (from the distance they looked cold and black, not unlike the lake they'd just crossed) told him this.

He would grab your wrist and you would tear your arm back trying to flee, but he simply wouldn't let you go. But as soon as you relax into the grip (when it was clear you wouldn't spin back from the pulling force you used), he'd release you and without saying a single word warning you never to do such a foolish thing again.

Harry was a good pick-pocket if the need arose though he tried everything else first, but even to the best these scenarios happened and they always left you with a racing heart and a reluctance to try it again.

Why was he still looking at him? Harry had no intention for a power play. He'd had his fair share of stupid decisions when it came to adult authority (Sister Augustine had never seen him rebellious for she'd always been very kind to them), Sullivan could sing a song about that... He didn't have the slightest intention to make his first

adult enemy before the first lesson started. Not as long as nobody of his friends was in trouble.

He broke eye-contact and surveyed the rest of the table while Cedric and Linda Felices (Hufflepuff's Fifth Year prefect) told him the teachers' and their subjects' name.

Of course, it was his luck that this man would teach Potions! What else had he expected? Before he could dwell on it too much, he heard his Head of House's name.

At the name 'Flitwick' he started.

Flitwick? That was goblin kin. How was that possible? 'flitca' meant 'mountains' while 'wicka' meant 'low.' Professor Flitwick's family clan (closely related kin) originally came from the High Ground, as kin from the Cambrian Mountains was called. Kertak would not only be able to say the geographic origin but would most likely be able to state their position in goblin society, simply by some sort of code that was hidden in every goblin clan name.

He couldn't wait to go to this man's classes.

As his eyes flew past Professor Snape once again, he noticed his neighbour wondering how come he hadn't noticed him before.

The man wore a turban and his name was, according to Cedric, Professor Quirrell.

A chill went down Harry's spine and he suppressed a shiver. For a moment he wondered what the heck just happened, when he nearly cried out in agony as his lower abdomen started cramp. He grabbed the table with one hand, clenched his hand at the hurting part of his stomach and breathed heavily forcing himself not to scream.

A/N: Wow... WOW! All I can say to this. TWENTY-ONE reviews? That is... wow. Thank you all and I'm sorry for not having replied them all, but I was sick and couldn't find the energy for it... Anyway, be assured that I read them all...

Thank you! You kind of terrified me with the replies, but in a good way... I hope you'll continue follow me on Harry's alternative journey.

Don't stop reviewing now that they've finally arrived at Hogwarts!

A/N: Two things:

- Sorry for the little mistake about the "Part One" of Chapter 7, I thought the rest of the sorting would last a little longer. It didn't, so I started a new chapter.

- Professor Sprout is Harry's Head of House. What I meant was that they showed him Professor Sprout as Head of House, but someone else mentioned Professor Flitwick, which caused him to focus on that name more than his own Head of House. I didn't mention her name, because I thought it was absolutely clear who the Head of Hufflepuff was. I'm sorry for the confusion!

Have fun!

Chapter 8, Part One: Hogwarts' Professors

"Harry?" Cedric asked, looking a little worried having noticed the young boy's sudden movement. However, the pain was gone as fast as it had presented itself and Harry was quite sure that the only time he'd felt anything comparable had been that one time in Diagon Alley, when Mr Ollivander had handed him that peculiar wand.

"Fine," he said calmly. It was odd, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He'd be wary of that teacher, though. "I guess I just ate something I shouldn't have." He'd eaten spoiled food before, this feeling was nothing like it, but all he wanted was distract Cedric and it worked

For about half an hour his peers were eating dessert before all puddings disappeared from the table. Albus Dumbledore stood up and told the First Years that the forest was strictly forbidden as was the access to the third-floor corridor, which was apparently rather new.

As the headmaster announced that they would be singing the school song, Harry's eyes widened. He wasn't a singer, he truly wasn't and he didn't unless forced. As the school began to sing, he managed to keep himself from covering his ears only with greatest effort. He didn't sing, but he did move his lips using the tune of a song Sully had once sung for him.

As they finished (he grinned when he noticed that the Weasley twins were the last to end their song using a funeral march), they were sent to bed.

Linda stood up and told the First Years to follow her. He noticed that the other First Years were standing up, too and realized that he had about thirty seconds before all Hufflepuffs were ready to leave. Quickly, he ducked under a boy with the name Ernie Macmillan and walked directly to the Slytherin table, where Theo, Blaise and Millicent were already up in order to leave.

"All of us will be busy tomorrow. I doubt First Years will have regular lessons then, but we should meet for breakfast on Tuesday. I understand if you don't want to, but..."

Millicent, who'd jumped at his sudden arrival, recovered the quickest. "Nonsense. Of course, we want to. Tuesday, breakfast at seven... Like this, we won't have to hurry," she smiled at him and Harry had the urge to hug her. Since he didn't have time, he wished them all goodnight and quickly moved through the busy hall. Only seconds later, he stood next to Neville, Hermione and Ron telling them what plans they'd just made. Neville and Hermione looked delighted, Ron slightly horrified at the thought of getting up so early. Nevertheless, he obliged.

As quickly as Harry had sought them, he was gone again and ready to follow Linda who was on her way out with the rest of the Hufflepuffs. At first, they walked together with the Gryffindors, causing Harry to smile at his new-found friends, then Linda took a turn that led downstairs while the Gryffindors walked upstairs, most likely into one of the towers. Harry heard several kids whispering that they wouldn't be able to find the Great Hall again and he wondered how that was possible.

The route wasn't even complicated. Besides that, the walls practically gave directions. No bricks were moving, but different sensations of warmth showed the way.

In front of the still-life portrait of a fruit bowl they stopped and Linda spoke, "Asphodel." The portrait moved away and revealed a hole. Before Harry entered though, he noticed several house-elves standing in the shadows watching them all with delight. He smiled and shortly bowed in goblin manner indicating 'goodnight,'

'honourable' and 'Elven kin.' Before he disappeared in the passageway, he saw several of them whispering to each other in astonishment.

On the other side, there was a room full of fat armchairs, yellow hangings and a bulletin board presented itself. It looked very comfortable. Linda introduced it as the Common Room of the Hufflepuff Basement. Here, they were allowed to relax after a strenuous day studying. Of course, they may also study here, but due to the occasional noise, it was better to study in the library or outside on a warm day. "However, note that, as Professor Dumbledore told you, it is forbidden to go near the forest. Curfew for First Years is at eight o'clock and you may leave the Basement at half-past six in the morning, but not earlier. Tomorrow, the First Years won't be having classes until the afternoon. At eight o'clock, Professor Sprout will be welcoming you to Hufflepuff and hand out your timetables... Note that magic in the corridors is not allowed and you better hold to that for Mr Filch, the caretaker isn't someone to trifle with. As prefect of Hufflepuff you may come to me whenever problems arise, but you can, of course, approach every older student or Professor Sprout directly. Are there any questions?"

Plenty, but nothing that couldn't wait until tomorrow. He saw Justin almost falling asleep while standing, which was why he didn't want to prolong this introduction. A girl, Hannah Abbott, actually did fall asleep after she'd sat into one of the chairs. As Linda turned around to show the dormitories, Harry walked over and shook Hannah softly.

"A few minutes and you can go to sleep," he whispered into her ears as she groaned slightly at the thought of standing up.

With a sigh of relief Harry noticed that there were several beds in one dormitory. He would share a room with Justin and Ernie. The rest of the First Year Hufflepuffs were all female.

Their things were already in the dormitory. His cauldron was standing there as well with a little note attached to it, written by Hagrid.

Hope to hear from you soon! Have a great time at Hogwarts, whatever house you've been put in. Hagrid

Harry smiled at the note and started unpacking, something he'd done several times, but never before had it taken so much time. It was then, when he realized just how much he possessed these days.

He looked at the beds (real beds! This was pure luxury!) and noticed how distanced they were to each other. The first few nights would be tough.

He wondered how Sara and Luke were doing. They were already in bed by now. The lights in St Mary's will have been switched off hours ago.

As the others went to sleep, Harry sat on his bed hugging his knees. A warm breeze softly touched his cheeks and he smiled sadly.

He missed them already, but it was a good kind of missing, the kind you knew was worth it because it meant you cared for them. He felt sorry for those who didn't feel this kind of loyalty and care for anybody.

It was hours later when he finally fell asleep.

The next morning, he got up at five, a consequence of his life at the orphanage. But those beds were comfortable, no wonder so many people liked sleeping in!

Quietly, he picked up some parchment, ink and a quill, left the dormitory and walked into the deserted Common Room. There, he sat down and started writing short letters to his family.

It was tiring and his face was screwed up in concentration as he did his best to spell word for word. All in all, he wrote three letters.

One for Kertak, one just for Char and one for the entire orphanage. The latter was the one that didn't speak of any magic but about his general impressions and that he'd found friends, whom he described rather vividly.

It took time, but by half-past six, when he heard some of his housemates waking up, he was finished and the letters sealed. As they were allowed to leave the Common Room at this point, Harry didn't remain.

Too eager was he to explore the castle.

As the portrait closed behind him he took a few turns before standing in front of another painting of a giant fruit bowl. Harry had found enough secret passageways to know that this was one. He put his right hand on it and closed his eyes in concentration asking the bowl to move. It didn't, but sudden heat waving off the green pear explained rather clearly what he had to touch in order to enter. As his fingers brushed the pear cautiously, it started to jiggle and revealed a large green door handle.

A ticklish pear? Well, he'd seen stranger things (not many, though). He took the handle and seized the hidden door open.

Carefully, he entered. In front of him was an enormous high-ceilinged room, about the size of the Great Hall or a completely deserted Tosa Lei.

It was a kitchen, if his orientation hadn't left him completely (and if there was one thing he could be sure of, then that it hadn't), directly positioned beneath the Great Hall. More house-elves than Harry had ever seen in his entire life together were busy cutting, slicing and dicing, the sounds of multiple pots and pans being handled rang in Harry's ears.

For a moment, he wasn't being noticed until a busy house-elf nearly ran into him.

"Maco," he said politely and the elf's large eyes widened even further.

"A student? What may Trinky does for young sir?"

"Nothing in particular. I'm sorry. I'm new here and didn't know that this was the kitchen... Anyhow, do you guys need a hand?" If the eyes expanded much more, Harry was starting to fear that they might explode.

"Young sir is student, you is not supposed to gives house-elves hand. You is supposed to learn."

"There is no better way to learn than to talk while your hands do an activity that doesn't require thinking... Like dicing cooking supplies."

He'd done it hundreds of times in the past. Consequence was that his writing suffered due to this form of studying, but he was excellent at learning things by heart simply by hearing them, especially when it was told as a story.

"But is only house-elves here, young student. We is not able to teach anything," Trinky.

"Now, I know that this isn't true. Only because humans cannot grasp what comes naturally to you," calling upon the elements, disappearance when it was impossible for wand-c... wizards and witches, "I'm only asking you to tell me some of the things you know that aren't your kin's secret. Nothing more."

By the time, he finished speaking he felt several pairs of eyes on him, now a few of the house-elves had stopped working.

Trinky disappeared in the assembled crowd and was having a wordless conversation with a few others. When she came back, she was smiling, "Of course, you is allowed to be here, but you is not supposed to work."

"Salà-dàio," Harry thanked her quickly with a bow, wondering again why he started speaking Gobbledegock when surrounded by beings that were magical but not human, "But please, give me something to do that does not offend you, when a wizard is doing it. Otherwise, I feel like an intruder." He had to do something. Never in his life had he stood up and done nothing of consequence.

Of course, the letters were important, but they weren't a necessity.

"You is not calling Trinky a goblin lady, sir, you is insulting the ladies," she spoke not unlike Kali, the Longbottom's house-elf, causing Harry to contradict the same way he'd contradicted yesterday.

She was a lot more persistent than Kali when it came to the acceptance of common courtesy, but in the end she yielded while calling him salet, but she didn't answer when he asked her what it meant.

He was given the task of waiting for a bowl of water to cook and to put salt in it as soon as the water was warm enough. He was able to

suppress a laugh as Nanna, a rather old, female elf, explained the matter to him as if it was the most complex science. What shocked him was that, apparently, it wasn't a mindless task in the eyes of some children who'd gained access to the kitchen over the years.

For an hour they were in the kitchen as Harry got acquainted with the main kitchen crew. According to Trinky and Nanna, in the early mornings, by lunchtime and in the evening, almost every house-elf was called to the kitchen to cook for the students, while in between only the main kitchen crew remained. Harry asked them a bit about the house-elves who lived at Hogwarts and by doing so, found out that there were entire family clans living at this castle for hundreds of years, but there were also some elves, whose families didn't live here and whom they saw once every decade.

When he left, several elves wanted to hand him all kinds of food, and, since he didn't want to insult them, he took it.

By the time he entered the Great Hall, it was half-past seven. He surveyed the room and noticed that the only First Year Hufflepuff that was already sitting at the table was a girl named Susan Bones. Apart from that, almost the entire Slytherin table was full. He noticed that his friends, that Malfoy boy and his comrades weren't there. A little confused, he walked over to the Slytherin table and approached the girl who'd held Millicent back at sorting.

"Good morning. Excuse me, where are the Slytherin First Years?" Gloomily, she looked at him. She was sitting, but was able to look into his eyes without having to raise her head.

"And pray tell me why I should tell you?" She directly stared at him, but had to notice rather swiftly, that the boy in front her wasn't easily impressed. Firmly, he met her gaze without blinking. He had no wish for dominance, but he wouldn't back down.

The rule said, 'Don't want trouble, don't look'em in the eye, but if they do, don't ever show yeh're scared.'

He wasn't scared, not even close, this girl was somehow similar to Alex, strict and ever-worrying about her charges, distrustful of everyone else, but not violent unless provoked.

And so, he met her gaze. For a full minute, they looked at each other before the older girl backed out.

Impressive. They usually avoided his gaze much faster.

"Professor Snape is introducing them to Hogwarts and declares the rules of the Slytherin House," she said, looking at him again, but the contest was over, "They'll be coming here in about half an hour. Why are you interested anyway?"

"Millicent, Blaise and Theo are my friends," he replied simply and wondered about the surprise in her eyes. He thanked her and wished her a good day, but as he turned, she called him back.

"What's your name?"

"Harry..." He'd really have to learn saying his last name along with the first, "Harry Potter."

"Gabriela Cornell. Guess, I'll be seeing you sometimes."

Harry smiled, "I'm looking forward to it." At that he turned around and walked back to his table. He passed it right away for he noticed Hermione who was already sitting at the Gryffindor table.

"All alone?" He asked quietly as he appeared behind her. She practically jumped out of her skin and again he couldn't help but wonder why people didn't watch their surroundings.

"Yes, I looked at the library. It's marvellous! You should go see it when you have the chance. So many books! Hogwarts, A History says that the Hogwarts library is one of the most valuable ones in Europe and one of the largest, second only to a handful of national libraries. Ron isn't awake yet, Neville I'm not sure. I swear I've seen him once, but he disappeared again," on their ride with the train, Harry had come to keep up with her, but he'd never met person capable to speak as quickly as an enthusiastic Hermione Granger, "How about you?"

Harry told her he'd been writing some letters and that he'd found the kitchen.

He sat down next to her and they started talking, when Harry suddenly felt a presence behind him. He stiffened knowing very well who it was.

Lacius Longbottom looked at him with his eyebrows raised, "I didn't know Hufflepuffs were allowed to sit at the Gryffindor table."

"I didn't know it was forbidden," Harry replied casually.

So, he'd watched him. He'd refused to give away his name and Lacius decided to observe him. He looked past the Boy Who Lived and smiled when he recognized the boy's twin, "Neville, good morning! Have you slept alright?" Neville only mumbled something and avoided his gaze.

A bang of guilt coursed through Harry as he realized that with his behaviour he was forcing Neville to decide whom he wanted to spend time with.

His friend or his brother.

Harry rationally knew that for the Others there was a difference between those terms, he just didn't understand it since to him, it was a synonym. But he was aware that to Neville, Lacius was his twin, his brother... Never matter how unfairly he was treated by him, he was family.

With a sigh, he decided to keep hostility in check, but, hell, he couldn't stand the kid.

"We've come off the wrong foot," Lacius said casually, "I didn't know you were Muggleborn," the way he said it, made Harry cringe in suppressed anger. 'Do it for Neville. Come on, Harry, get yourself a grip. Nobody has ever died from ignoring arrogance, just leave it.' That and similar thoughts kept him from voicing his annoyance, "By now, you'll have been informed what is expected of you, what knowledge you are supposed to possess," 'Ignore it! Ignore it! Ignore it! He's not worth it to get in trouble on your first day. He really isn't.', "Your lack of proper information is understandable. Neville explained that you were introduced to the magical world before you received the letter, but that it apparently wasn't done thoroughly enough, that you aren't aware of rather basic facts," 'Ignore it! Ign... Oh what the

heck, how dare he insult Kertak? Walk away! You don't like hurting people, remember?', "I can help you with this. What do you say?"

"First, you ignore me, then you insult me, not by words but by your tone of voice. Then you insult one of my best friends who was kind enough to tell me of the magical world and now you expect me to accept your... what exactly? Assistance? Guidance? Sorry, Laci... Boy Who Lived or not, I'm not interested. Since you are Neville's brother, I'll refrain from outright antagonism. Otherwise, I think it'd be the best for the both of us if we just ignored each other." He looked at Neville whose eyes had widened during his speech. He moved around the sky-blue eyed boy and whispered to Neville, "I'm sorry. I know it doesn't look this way, but I tried. He's your brother and for that I respect him, otherwise..." He sighed, "I understand if you don't want my friendship, but I do offer it." With those words he looked into the round face, whose eyes were still widened, but slowly Neville nodded.

He smiled in relief and wished Hermione and Neville a joyful first day at Hogwarts. Laci, he merely gave a short nod. Shortly after, he sat down by the Hufflepuff table right next to Cedric.

"You've just met Laci Longbottom," Cedric said sounding rather curious, "What is he like?"

"Don't ask me. I've just met him," he said carefully. He didn't like Laci Longbottom, but he'd been wrong in his judgment before ('Really? When?') and since he respected the brother, he had no right of bad-mouthing him.

Slowly, the Hufflepuff table started to fill itself with students, and a lively conversation about the classes started.

"Oh no, double Potions," Marietta, a friend of Linda groaned, "First thing this morning. That's just cruel." This sentence caused Harry to shiver a bit.

"What's wrong with Potions?"

Silence followed his question.

"It's taught by Professor Snape," some boy from the upper years said, but several people hushed him. It took Harry five seconds to

realize that it wasn't due to showing disrespect, but because, apparently, this wizard had the uncanny ability to hear things he'd better not. Ten minutes later, Harry had the impression of a rather inhuman being that was feared by half of his house. Only very few, like Cedric and Linda, spoke highly of Slytherin's Head of house. It appeared that he very much favoured his own house, but that most Ravenclaws managed to gain his... acceptance, but he held no patience for many Hufflepuffs and absolutely no tolerance for the Gryffindor house.

Harry never gave much credit to rumours. He was a storyteller after all. He knew when things were being exaggerated. But he'd become wary of the tall wizard yesterday as their eyes had met.

He looked a little less forward to his first Potions lesson.

It was about twenty minutes later when Professor Sprout arrived, a good-natured woman with a kind heart. Harry became fond of her immediately and that she was teaching Herbology only added to it. She welcomed them all with an honest smile and offered them help whenever the need arose. She then handed out the First Year's timetable, which Harry looked through.

Usually, they'd have Herbology and Defence Against the Dark Arts in the morning, but that was cancelled due the fact it was their first day. Their first class would be Transfiguration.

Tomorrow, they'd have a double lesson in Herbology and Charms. Harry was already looking forward to that morning. At that, he noted that Herbology was apparently classes they held with the Gryffindors. Tuesday afternoons were filled with History of Magic, while Wednesday afternoons were off. In the morning they had a double lesson Defence and one lesson of Transfiguration. Thursdays would be filled mostly with Astronomy and Charms. On Friday, they'd have Potions and History of Magic.

Cedric, who'd been sitting next to him and was examining his timetable over his shoulder, suddenly frowned and looked up, "That can't be right, Professor. You must've taken the wrong ones. We have Potions with the Ravens, not the Lions."

"No, actually, it is correct. Professor Snape asked the headmaster to split his classes differently. Objective was to separate Gryffindors

and Slytherins for you know how well those Houses get along and it must be quite stressful having them in the same classroom. He thought it best not to have Slytherins and Hufflepuffs in the same lesson either for reasons you may imagine." Harry frowned. He disliked the way they were saying 'Slytherin' and suddenly recalled Millicent's remark who'd spoken of its bad reputation.

"They'd chew them up and spit them out," Sam, a friend of Cedric's, murmured looking at Harry (seeing a very small boy), causing Harry to deepen his frown, especially when he noticed that Professor Sprout looked grave at this prospect, but didn't contradict.

"He just wanted to have the troublemakers and the less adept students in one class, so he can talk down on them all," a friend of Linda's whispered, but Harry picked it up.

Now that he couldn't imagine. Certainly, he'd nothing but his instincts to go on, but if Professor Snape belonged to the people he'd thought him to be, he wasn't downright cruel. Misanthropic, maybe, cold and detached, cynical, yes, but there was a reason why that type of person didn't let you go when you tried to tear away.

He was glad, when Professor Sprout reproached that statement, but was surprised when he noticed that she didn't seem to entirely disagree with that opinion.

As they finished breakfast and the older students excused themselves for they had to go to their classes, Harry sought the Owlry where Hedwig was already waiting for him.

"Hey girl, how are you?" He asked her quietly as he walked past several owls, "I have a little request to make. These are three letters and I'd be glad if you'd first give those two," he showed her two envelopes (the personal letters for Char and Kertak), "To Kertak and then seek out Sara to give her the letter I wrote for the entire orphanage. Can you do that? It's best if Kertak gives the letter to Char personally. I know those two... They are not going to talk to each other any other way, at least not until all awkwardness is gone and it won't before they're not talking to each other. So, give them a little push into the right direction from me, will you?" Affectionately, she started playing with his left ear as if trying to calm him, held rather still as he put the letters around her leg and flew out of the Owlry seconds later.

Harry spent the morning by exploring the castle a little. He didn't encounter any of his friends, but he'd always preferred being alone while examining new hunting ground. He knew it wasn't the same to what he'd had in London, but it felt good to wander again, to find secret passages and the castle was so enormous and ever-changing, it was as if he was in another city. Much more than London had ever been able, the castle showed him the way, though it also seemed to be insistent on staying rather mysterious.

By the end of the morning, he'd found seven different ways (three of which were shortcuts to what Linda had shown them) of finding the Hufflepuff Common Room after leaving the Great Hall. As Hermione had told him to, he also explored the library and the sheer amount of words that was almost freely at your disposal left him speechless.

At lunch, he was meeting with his peers from Hufflepuff and they used a long, relaxing meal to get acquainted with each other a little better. As it was, they found out that he was an orphan, a fact they met with so much sympathy, he had to say three times that he was very happy and grateful to live at St Mary's. It took some persuasion on his part, so they would willingly talk of their families and for the first time, he realized just how difficult it was to talk to the Others. Yesterday, he hadn't noticed it so much due to his own nervousness, but today he saw just how different their lives had been.

Parents seemed to be handing out responsibility rather judiciously, a fact their children weren't always grateful for. They wanted to be treated as adults, not children.

At some point, he nearly told Ernie that it wasn't so much fun feeling responsible for kids only few years younger than yourself, but he refrained from it. He didn't want pity, he never had.

It wasn't as if he disliked Ernie. Problem was that their pasts were just very different. Ernie was the single child of a large, apparently influential family, the Macmillans, and, though not spoiled, had more often than not received what he'd hoped for while Harry had always considered himself lucky, when the world didn't come crumbling down after a moment's peace.

What Harry liked about him though, was that he didn't consider himself more important than others, that Ernie didn't care at all what

family you came from. It was rarely seen amongst those with influence. Cedric was apparently another example. The Diggorys were rather liked and respected.

While he respected Ernie and cherished talks with Justin, Harry was particularly fond of three Hufflepuff girls, Susan Bones, Eloise Midgen and Hannah Abbott. Eloise was exceedingly shy resulting in fierce protectiveness from Harry's part. Hannah, he liked talking to, she was smart and rather quiet. Susan was the kind of girl he'd have liked as a sister, a good sense of humour with a very caring streak that would've made her an asset in the orphanage, if she had come from a similar background. However, since she came from a rather big family with multiple cousins who lived only a few minutes from her own house, she most likely would understand the dynamics of St Mary's rather well.

Sally-Anne Perks, he was a bit unsure how to talk to, especially when she mentioned that she would've preferred being home-schooled, but that her parents hadn't been able to take the necessary time off. She didn't really want to be here, a fact he simply couldn't begin to understand.

About an hour later, they sat in the Transfiguration classroom nervously awaiting Professor McGonagall's arrival. She gave a speech about the difficulties and dangers of her subject. She seemed very strict, but, if Harry wasn't completely mistaken, she had a heart of gold that was only beating for this school and its students.

By the end, they were allowed to practise on a match that they were supposed to turn into a needle. Not unlike his troubles when he'd tried it at home, he was unable to transform the match. He was slightly relieved to see that everybody else was having troubles as well.

As he kept trying to change the match by following Professor McGonagall's instructions, he tried to find out why this was more difficult than turning a flower into an animal. Matches and needles didn't have a pulse (flowers didn't either, but they were alive), no warmth on their own... Actually, that wasn't true. The match could get warm, when it was lit. The needle was cooler than the match, while the flower and the toad both depended on the warming effects of the sun. He took the match and focused.

A small flame was lit and Harry stared at it. He wanted it to go out, to cool it down. He took his wand and flicked it imitating the snapping of thumb and middle-finger. Immediately, the flame died. He repeated the incantation while focusing on nothing more than changing wood into metal. A moment later, there was an iron match in his hand. It was still warm, as if someone had put it into a fire.

It wasn't a needle, but he had been able to transfigure it. He heard Professor McGonagall praise Susan who'd been able to make the match pointy now resembling a toothpick. When she saw his transformed piece of metal, astonishment was evident on her face. Susan received two points and so did Harry for 'a very good start' as Professor McGonagall put it.

Since it was their first day, they didn't get any homework, but judging by the tone Professor McGonagall had used, this was the only exception they would ever be granted for their entire time at Hogwarts.

Anyway, Harry had no interest in becoming lazy on his very first day. He'd never received anything for free (apart from the loyalty of some really great people such as Char) and had been inclined to work for even the simplest of things.

The fact his name had been written down at birth changed nothing. He'd left his family, his responsibilities in order to study magic.

He wasn't about to forget that.

So, it wasn't surprising that, instead of relaxing in the Common Room, he finally finished reading The Standard Book of Spells and felt more or less prepared for their first Charms class tomorrow. He was particularly curious when it came to the use of telekinetic incantation for it kind of sounded like what he used as last self-defence.

To push people away...

Nobody who'd been on the other side of that had ever dared to attack him again. In many ways, this trick had saved his and his friends' lives on multiple occasions.

He wondered if Wingardium Leviosa worked with the same principle... He couldn't wait for his first lesson with Flitwick and Kandrill.

Well, of course he couldn't be sure (especially not the 'honourable' part), but his name and physical appearance were undeniably of goblin origin. He just wondered how he became a wand-carrier. Kertak had never told him that there was a possibility for goblin kin to gain a wand.

Knowing that, at least the most important, answers would come tomorrow, he picked up History of Magic and just as he opened it, he discovered the Weasley twins waving at him from outside the library where he'd been studying.

Well, he'd definitely have to count on Kertak's knowledge for his first History lesson tomorrow. He put all of his books in his old bag and approached the twins with a smile.

That's it for this year! I'll be writing over the holidays, but there will be no beta-ing, because MissGoalie75 isn't available until after New Year.

TWENTY-EIGHT reviews? Thank you, people! Thank you so much... What makes me happy in particular, is that you write with so much detail what you like about my story, your own ideas and what I have to look out for (Professor Sprout - Professor Flitwick ;-)).

Forgotten Lake: I passed on the message to MissGoalie75 and she was very happy about the compliment. I agree, by the way: Beta's are an important part of the picture.

So, all I have to say left is Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Reviews are the best Christmas presents ever ;-)

Chapter 8, Part Two: Hogwarts' Professors

"Harry, our trusted friend, we have..." Fred started.

"Awaited you..." George continued with a smirk identical to his brother's.

"Impatiently. We are giving you..."

"An offer you can't deny." The last sentence was spoken simultaneously.

"May I first hear the offer, gentlemen, or have you already been taught the art of reading another being's mind, allowing you to be aware of my thoughts?" he asked politely. It was like his initial talks with Kertak, which hadn't been much more than a challenge of wits. Friendship and brotherhood had followed later.

The twins' smiles only faltered for a second in astonishment, but were followed by brighter grins.

"Thy cunning wit is much needed, sire. Would you please share it with us deprived souls?" Fred asked, bowing deeply causing Harry to chuckle. He bowed his head a bit and his shoulders twitched in amusement.

"'We always speak the truth,' the trickster told the fool, 'For when we lie, people know we cheat.' The thing about pranksters is that people are wary of them, even when they don't plan anything. So, I guess you think adding some innocent blood to your jokes will have people lower their guard. It only works once, you know... And I'd rather not be viewed a trickster on my very first day." He wasn't a joker, he'd never been. People came to him when they had trouble, not when they wanted to laugh. He enjoyed fighting solely with the power of words, but he didn't pull pranks. As long as they were harmless, he let them happen, though.

"What was that?" George asked, but both siblings had their mouths open, "That quotation... I've never heard of that before."

"You haven't?" Now that was a surprise. Kertak had told him that one last year. Harry had thought it to be well-known in the magical world. Of course, the original was Gobbledegook, but he had

expected to find a proper translation somewhere. But seeing the twin's reaction, all he could hope for was that there actually was a translation. He'd look for it in the library as soon as he got the chance. Madame Pince, the librarian, might help him. "The story's called The Order of Chaos. You've honestly never heard of it?"

"That sounds like a story I can relate to. Can you tell us?" Both seemed genuinely curious, so Harry complied, but under the condition they looked for another location. The corridors weren't a place for stories. They were supposed to be told when you were sheltered, safe... Stories were only told when everybody was sitting on the ground... or at a table.

Since it was time for them to eat dinner, they decided to visit the Great Hall, which was already rather crowded.

"I don't think we're going to find a quiet corner, Harry," Fred said as they surveyed the room. The younger boy looked around and noticed that the Slytherin table wasn't completely filled. In fact, it seemed as if the upper years were missing while the younger ones were here. Briefly, he wondered what it was about.

"Hey, Harry," Hermione called from the Gryffindor table waving her hands, excitement shone brightly in her face. She was almost bursting with enthusiasm. Harry returned the wave and shortly moved his head to indicate that he was going to sit by his Slytherin friends. Hermione leaned over and said something to Ron (who was already eating) and Neville. Both looked up and indicated that they'd noticed him. She continued talking to them and while Neville stood up with a plate in his hand, Ron seemed rather dubious. In the end though, he followed them slowly approaching the Slytherin table.

George held Harry back, "What are you doing?"

"The Slytherin table is only half full, therefore it'll be the only table that gives us the necessary quiet to tell a story without disturbing anybody else," Harry explained, his eyes were shining happily as he noticed that Theo, Blaise and Millicent (who'd been sitting rather close to each other) had discovered his approach.

"But, it's Slytherin," Fred said, eyes widened, completely flabbergasted.

"And you're Gryffindors. I'm a Hufflepuff," the eleven-year-old, underage wizard shrugged, "You'd be condemning one quarter of the Wizarding World if you despise everything Slytherin." He remembered what Kertak had told him of the Houses and their human founders (what he knew of them, at least). Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin had been as close as brothers with occasionally divided opinions resulting in regular fights that almost became legendary, especially when they 'discussed' matters they didn't agree on. But they'd greatly cared for each other. It had to be painful to recognize that years of rivalry was all that future generations of witches and wizard would remember... And yet, human kin had a tendency to recall bad occurrences more vividly than good ones.

A tendency that goblins had, too, as Harry had to remember Kertak on multiple occasions. He greatly respected the goblins he'd met, but they had a long memory, not surprising for they lived a long time.

If he was honest (thinking of Cline and Sullivan), he had a very sharp memory as well. He was human kin partly raised by goblins... He did have problems forgiving those who'd done him and his friends' ill.

Fred and George both looked at him, then at each other, until, after a short moment, they nodded in agreement and together with Neville, Hermione and Ron, they sat down by Theo, Millicent and Blaise, who'd seated themselves by the end of the table.

"How come so few Slytherins are here at dinner?" Hermione was regarding her surroundings curiously.

"Professor Snape's policy," Blaise explained, "Everybody has to assemble for breakfast at seven and for lunch at twelve unless you have excused yourself. Dinner is divided. The Fletchlings, that is us, up to Third Years are all eating at half-past six, while the upper years may choose for themselves, except for Friday and Sunday, then everybody is supposed to show up for dinner at seven. Professor Snape always attends the meals at the official hours," he nodded towards the staff table, but Harry had noticed the tall wizard's presence at the table when he'd entered the Great Hall, so he didn't look up.

"He seems to be rather strict," Hermione said frowning a bit, and then mentioned that the Gryffindor house had no regulations like this. Fred and George muttered 'greasy, controlling git' under their breath causing Millicent, Theo and Blaise to look at them coolly.

"He's strict, but he's an excellent Head of House. Don't insult him, or at least, have the courtesy not to do it around us," Millicent practically hissed, "It's known he's not always fair as a teacher, but within the house he's fair himself and doesn't tolerate anybody to step out of the line, no matter who they are." At that, she gave a rather dirty look towards the boy Harry had heard to be Malfoy. The blond boy merely looked back coldly, only to turn away with an arrogant sneer.

He also seemed rather surprised.

As they sat down and filled their place, they talked about their first lessons. Apparently, the Gryffindors had Charms, while the Slytherins had been taught by Professor Sprout. Hermione told them of what they'd learned today. They'd been looking into Wingardium Leviosa, but only in theory. Hermione had received five points for knowing everything there was to know about it.

They'd almost finished eating while chatting about school, when Fred suddenly turned to Harry again, "So, the Order of Chaos, you said."

What followed was a brief summary about their meeting outside the library. Not even Hermione had heard of the story, so everybody was eager to hear it.

Harry felt at home. He'd wondered whether the Others listened to stories with the same eagerness as his family and was glad to see that this was the case, indeed.

"It is dark, while the moon shines bright, as the old youngling, a cunning fool, slowly raced upon the ship floating on the sand in Desert Sea. His friend stood beside him many miles away and the fool screamed quietly, so he was heard but not seen, "Trickster, long it's been I saw you last, just yesterday as ate we dinner at noon. Tell me, how is it that day approaches after a sun sets since darkness follows the lack of light."

'The trickster answered, "Time draws circles in a straight line. That is the night chases day as darkness pursues the light."

'The fool asked, "Trickster, why is the absence of truth not always a lie?"

"We always speak the truth," the trickster told the fool, "For when we lie, people know we cheat."

As Harry told the story of the trickster and the fool, a discussion at the staff table broke loose, who'd very well noticed that some students didn't sit at their respective table.

It began with the question whether the rules demanded the Hogwarts tables to be separated (they didn't, but it was a tradition that lasted for about two-hundred years. Professor Dumbledore remembered his father who'd criticised the decree of Headmaster Bones, who had made that decision. He'd been but eleven and until today, he hadn't really thought about it...) and ended with Professor McGonagall asking Professor Snape why the older students of his house weren't here.

"The youngest learn very quickly to respect the upper years, which is important and I want them to have this respect, especially those who've been told their entire life of their own importance," at that his eyes drew away from the odd sight at the Slytherin table and instead he viewed Draco Malfoy, only to survey Laci Longbottom. "Anyway, breakfast and lunch I don't accept to be skipped by any student, which is why everybody has to be present at specific times. When they all eat together, the First Years are taught what sort of conduct is expected of them, which is my goal. However, they usually learn this a little too quickly and grow rather quiet, while the upper years talk. Thus, I've decided that up to third year, there is a specific time for dinner, while the others may choose for themselves. Like this, the younger students can speak freely amongst their peers and they become more skilled at solving problems themselves since they attend the lessons during the day that usually result in questions. Dinner is the perfect time to discuss them."

His older colleagues looked at him in utter astonishment. All those years, and nobody had ever asked. The only person that didn't seem to be surprised was the headmaster himself for he'd been explained the principle many years ago.

"I wonder what Harry is telling them now," Professor Sprout muttered, having noticed that everybody else was listening to the small child.

"Well, as it seems to keep the Weasleys in their seats, I'd imagine nothing good," the Head of Slytherin stated with a sneer, earning a rather angry look from his rival House's Head that was mingled with a good portion of resignation.

"He seems to be telling a story," Professor Dumbledore said with his eyebrows furrowed.

"Why would you say so?"

It was tiny Professor Flitwick who answered, "The others are silent, just listening without asking questions..." He stopped and shook his head, "He's far too young to be a storyteller, Albus."

"Don't let the boy's age and height deceive you, Filius. He's rather mature, much more so than the average student from the upper years," the old man's blue eyes were fixed on the rare sight in front of him. When he'd said goodbye to Harry Potter a month ago, he had a feeling that this boy would make life at Hogwarts interesting, however he hadn't expected it to be on his second evening at school.

Then, he looked over to the Gryffindor table, where Laci was talking to Percy Weasley, Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas. The Boy Who Lived was about as much a mystery as the small orphan sitting at the Slytherin table.

Severus had told him this morning that, apparently, a year ago, the Longbottoms had started to dine regularly with the Malfoys who'd been discretion itself, never saying a word about it (of course, becoming friends with the most influential family in the Wizarding World of Great Britain was worth secrecy for a few months). Severus had only heard about it yesterday, when young Mr Malfoy mentioned something like this in the presence of his peers.

Sheltered for nine years of life (practically isolated from the rest of the world), then introduced to Wizarding Society by Lucius Malfoy... Professor Dumbledore didn't know what to think of it. Surely, Laci had to be a good child, but it did worry him.

Nevertheless, Laciuss had preferred Gryffindor over Slytherin, the hat had told him this. He had preferred courage over ambition and cunning, which said quite a bit about the boy's character.

The best.

Bravery and chivalry, but it seemed as if he was also gifted with Slytherin's characteristics of resourcefulness and determination.

He didn't doubt Laciuss' heart.

"How was your first lesson with the First Years?" Professor Flitwick asked Minerva McGonagall.

"I was having lessons with the Hufflepuffs, and I must say that I witnessed quite a bit of potential in this class." A sentence that was practically comparable to 'aptitude' said by the rest of her colleagues with the exception of the youngest member of the staff. The Potions Master would bite off his own tongue first before using the word 'aptitude.' "Young Mr Potter shows as much potential as his father." What followed was derisive snort from late James Potter's rival at school, causing the Animagus to realize her mistake.

She'd wanted Severus to be neutral (or as neutral as he could be facing James Potter's and Lily Evans' son), there was no need to remind him that there was more likeness between father and son than physical appearance (safe for those emerald eyes).

"What about your first class, Filius?"

"Oh, I cannot judge the amount of their talents already, Minerva, for as you know, I introduce them to Magical Theory for nearly two months before they are finally allowed to try things out, except for that first lesson when I introduce the Hovering Charm," his tone of voice implied just how forward he was looking to the practical lessons. He was a very intelligent man and firmly believed in the principle of 'trying things out,' although he'd never endanger a student for it. "But Miss Granger, one of your cu... First Years, Minerva, seems to be very smart and well-read. I'm looking forward to seeing her performance." She nodded. She'd met Miss Granger to inform her she was a witch, a clever girl. "I wonder just how boring these first lessons are to the students." He sighed, while the last

sentence provoked a chuckle from the good-natured Herbology teacher.

"I've been teaching for twenty years, Filius, and was one of your first students. Neither myself, nor any of my Hufflepuffs have ever complained of boredom during your lessons. Since you always allow the students to study proper wand movements and your explanations are so interesting, much less strenuous than Adalbert Waffling's, which, by the way, I have never managed to finish, you don't have to fear that your class will be viewed as dull."

"I can only concur, Filius," Severus Snape said quietly, "My students are rather fond of those classes."

The tiny wizard caught the tall man's gaze before he gave a short bow thanking them both for the kind words.

"Harry, you do know that this story doesn't make sense at all, right?" Hermione asked hesitantly, shortly after Harry grew quiet again, "An old youngling, it's impossible..." Admittedly, she'd been enthralled by it. Harry had a talent to speak so well. Surely, he had a child's voice, but there was something in the way he narrated, the pace he used, that made it hard to do anything but listen. And yet, he'd given his audience time to think.

Enough for her to realize that this story didn't make sense at all.

"Chaos has order, because it's always chaos and therefore never in order... That's how I see it," Blaise interjected. Surely, the story was contradicting itself, but still... It fit without really making sense.

Order of Chaos. The twins agreed enthusiastically with that, before, for some reason, they asked Blaise what kind of pranks he'd pulled in the course of his life. The question caused Millicent to growl, begging the twins not to continue the subject.

A lively conversation between those four started, which was mainly about some of the tricks Blaise had used over the years and how Millicent usually had been suspected of committing some of the pranks along with him, though she'd never done anything. Since Harry saw her laugh, he knew she wasn't holding a grudge, thinking it rather funny herself.

"You're a great storyteller," Neville stated with his eyes wide, seemingly in awe, "I was listening the entire time, but I didn't really get its meaning, yet I just couldn't stop paying attention." Harry had the urge to look at his hands since compliments concerning his narrative skills were usually handed out a lot less bluntly (usually, it was a mere request to tell another story). However, he kept the shy boy's gaze and smiled thanking him at the same time.

Ron wanted to say something, when all of a sudden he heard the twins talking about some stunts they'd once pulled on their little brother and immediately explained in detail just how frightening it had been, when that broom had caught fire. Harry looked up sharply.

Fire? Not good.

Pranks and fire ended in catastrophes, they always did.

"That was dangerous," Hermione said looking rather stern, "It's dangerous to play with fire."

"It was nothing," Ron retorted immediately. He was a rather blunt person, which suited Harry just fine, but Hermione was hurt a lot more easily.

He didn't want them to fight, at least, not until they were a bit closer, for young friendships were fragile.

"My aunt and cousin died in an explosion," Harry stated, not coolly, just neutral, his face carefully blank.

He remembered the firewall coming at him.

More than that, he remembered Hell.

He wasn't sure how well the twins were able to control fire and with this one sentence he wanted to make clear just how dangerous the most passionate of the four elements of nature (that was how Kertak called fire, earth, water and air) was.

Silence followed his statement. Nobody was sure how to look at him.

With the exception of Theo, who looked at him with his face void of emotion, but his eyes flickered with hidden curiosity.

"He wasn't in the air, when the broom..." Fred defended himself meekly, every mischievous smile was wiped from his face (it made Harry feel a bit sorry), "I mean... We'd never hurt people with our pranks."

"I know," Harry said softly, "But fire is a dangerous partner for pranks. It never stands still; it spreads if it receives the opportunity. Don't get me wrong, there nothing better than a warming fire when it's cold..."

How was he ever to explain this? Fire had saved his life and endangered it at the same time. Of all the elements, it was the one he couldn't even begin to explain.

"It becomes dangerous the moment you believe you can control it. You can't. It's impossible."

He'd tried. Tried and failed. At least, nobody had died.

His eyes must have somehow revealed his inner turmoil for Hermione carefully laid a hand on his shoulder. Fred and George mumbled an apology and promised to be more careful.

"Just with fire, that's all I'm asking," Harry replied with his voice still quiet. He didn't want to think about the past. He wanted the fire to be gone. Without really noticing it, his right hand curled to a fist, what he did notice was that all flames attached to candles within a five-foot range dimmed significantly. Breathing calmly, he slowly opened his hands knowing that otherwise the small flames would die.

"It's a lot better in the original Gobbledegock, Order of Chaos," the eleven-year-old spoke up all of a sudden in a desperate attempt to quiet the memories of the past. Besides, it was important they knew this, "A lot more poetry, much more complex, but strangely making more sense at the same time. I apologize for butchering it, but the people I told the story don't understand Gobbledegock, and it was too good a story not to tell. I'm a lousy translator, though. Sorry."

"You speak Gobbledegock?" Millicent asked, rather astonished.

"Well enough, I guess. I can keep up a conversation with a goblin without faltering, but I'm better at merely understanding it. Kertak

and I usually speak English with each other, except when I'm asking him to do otherwise." What followed was utter silence and before Harry realized it, he noticed Hagrid only a few feet away, who chuckled jovially.

"Harry is a special one, isn't he?" The gigantic man asked, his beard curled into a smile. Then, he looked around, "Yeh do know that this is the Slytherin table, Harry? And yeh three," He was looking at the Weasley brothers, "yeh belong ter Gryffindor."

Harry explained from the beginning what was going on, why they were sitting here, mentioned the Order of Chaos and where he'd first heard it.

"Kertak is one of my best friends, my brother actually, and thirty years old, that's fourteen years for humans. As you most likely have guessed already, he's a goblin and he was the one introducing me to the magical world."

"So, your parents are Muggle-born?" Fred asked, sounding intrigued rather than scathing (unlike Laci Longbottom).

"No," he said firmly. Hagrid had told him that the Potters had gone to Hogwarts, "They were a wizard and witch respectively, but they both died when I was a year old." He was glad the majority already had this peace of information, but to see two pranksters grow serious, was a hard thing to witness, "I met Kertak when I found Diagon Alley at five or six..."

"What do you mean 'you found Diagon Alley,' was the orphanage nearby, or..." Blaise hesitated. He didn't mean to pry, but it was intriguing and Harry was almost intentionally being vague.

"I don't belong to those who've only had one home, Blaise, I'm not that lucky." Well, luck was relative. Hell certainly hadn't been a place where you wanted to spend your entire life, but he couldn't forget they were Others.

They didn't know.

Not yet anyway. He'd only met them yesterday, knowing he was an orphan was enough, everything else wasn't something he wanted to burden them with.

Briefly, he wondered whether he'd ever want to tell them.

"Sit down, Hagrid," he kindly offered his tall friend and gestured at a chair next to Neville.

"That is very nice of yeh, Harry," the gruff but warm-hearted man mumbled and attempted to sit down, yet he didn't, when he caught Professor McGonagall's very stern expression, "Er... Guess they want me at the Staff table. Anyway, thanks. Hopefully seeing yeh soon. Yeh've off Wednesday afternoon, righ'? Interested in a nice cup'a tea?"

"I'd love to, Hagrid," the emerald sparkled in contained excitement, "What time do you expect me there?"

"Not so important. Between two and three o'clock. Listen, I really got to go. See yeh all. Bye, Harry!" Thus said, the gigantic man approached the Staff table.

"Good evenin', Professors," Hagrid greeted them politely and sat down.

"You belong to Hogwarts' staff, Hagrid," Professor McGonagall spoke as soon as he was seated, "It is your duty to sit with the rest of your colleagues."

"Sorry, Professor McGonagall. Just wanted to say 'ello ter Harry and he offered me a seat."

"Well, can you at least tell us what has been going through the children's mind when they decided to sit down at the Slytherin table when only three of them belong to this house?" It was impressive how she managed to keep her voice irritated as perfectly as she was able to contain her curiosity.

"Of course, Professor... The twins asked Harry ter..." At the end of his explanation, all were surprised to hear Flitwick squeak in delight and turned to look at him.

"The Order of Chaos? Tanîr y rînat? Are you sure, Hagrid? Mr Potter told a goblin tale? Why ever would he know one?"

"It seems as if Mr Potter found a goblin friend, when he was younger," Professor Dumbledore explained, but at the Charms professor's incredulous look, he was inclined to ask, "Is that unusual, Filius?"

"A goblin friend close enough to a human to tell his kin's tales? You may expect this once or twice in a hundred years, Albus. It's most unusual. I'm looking forward to seeing this young Mr Potter in my lesson tomorrow."

Before he could say anything more, the Potions professor excused himself and took leave.

"Oh," the tiny wizard murmured, "It's been more than ten years. I sometimes forget just how much Severus loathed James Potter and his friends in life and as it seems in death as well. I apologize, Albus, I'll be more diplomatic in the future."

Goblin tales.

Magical talent.

Intelligence.

Nurture of those weaker than him.

Fear of Water.

Independence.

Experience with loss.

Compassion without pity.

Harry Potter wasn't a person to describe with one word.

Theodore Nott was aware of this.

He'd sworn long ago never to get close to people ever again. After her death. Nothing was worth the pain you felt by losing them.

Harry Potter wasn't his friend. He was an interesting human subject to dissect. Nothing more.

An intriguing one at that, yes, but he would not become his friend.

He wouldn't.

No matter how easy it was listening and talking to him.

Harry's second night was worse than his first. That wasn't Hogwarts' fault. The castle made him feel much more welcome than any other place he'd ever visited.

But he missed them so much; it was like having a stomachache. He only hoped Hedwig would return very soon. He needed to know how they were. He needed to know they were doing alright.

Before he finally started to slip away into the land of dreams, he thought over that unusual dinner. At least according to his peers from Hufflepuff it was.

Even Evan, a seventh year, couldn't remember a time when the House tables had been mixed. They'd asked him why he'd chosen Slytherin of all tables to sit down... A question he had not really been able to answer.

'Why ever not?' he'd countered, without sounding as exasperated as he felt, just a neutral question.

Nobody had been able to give him a proper answer without avoiding eye-contact. As they went to bed, he'd left quite a lot of older students thinking.

It took him a long time to fall asleep, but his inner clock still woke him up at five. He didn't even feel tired. Quietly, he went to the bathroom and showered making as little noise as possible.

Warm water.

St Mary's Orphanage usually had warm water, except when money was particularly scarce and they needed all the money to keep the house itself warm.

To him, it was still luxury, though. He couldn't forget the times when water had been icy. He remembered the hitching of his breath when

the water had come crushing down... And he' tried to warm it, but it had not been possible.

'Hell's fire and ice, it either burns you or freezes you.'

He hadn't lied to Cline.

He couldn't control water, not in the slightest. He still had the marks on his body to prove it.

One of the reasons he was glad to be an early-riser was that it was unlikely to meet another person in the bathroom. He really disliked questions concerning some of the scars on his body.

He put on his jumpers, a shirt that would need some serious sewing very soon and put on his school uniform.

Silent as a ghost, he entered his dorm once again and obtained everything he'd need for today. He put them in his old, shabby bag and left for the Common Room.

With an unpractised hand, he picked up the book Hagrid had given to him and started writing down some of the things happening yesterday. He had a sharp memory, but he wanted to make sure he didn't forget anything.

It also had the advantage of sophisticating his unsteady handwriting. After half an hour his eyes and hand hurt with his fingers full of ink. However, he refused to give up, gritted his teeth and continued practising.

They would be given quite a lot of homework rather soon. He just hoped the teachers would understand his lack of skill when it came to writing. He looked at his hand that, due to the red ink he used, seemed bloody.

Already tired, he lowered his head and sighed. The young boy was glad they had lessons where it was possible for him to listen and practise.

Yesterday, he'd noticed just how much his peers wrote down and wondered why they did it.

Did they remember things better that way?

He looked up when he heard someone entering the Common room.

"Good morning, Linda," he smiled.

"Good morning, Harry. Do you have eyes on your back, or what?" She yawned in the middle of her question stretching the 'back' part.

"I'm just good at guessing when people draw closer," Harry replied hiding his hand knowing exactly what it looked like.

"Do you mind company?" She asked, her hands carried several books, which were inspected by the eleven-year-old as he shook his head gesturing her (with his left hand) to sit down.

Standard Book of Spells, Volume One

Standard Book of Spells, Volume Two

She put down every Volume up to Volume Five along with what seemed tons of notes.

"Busy day?" He asked with his eyebrows raised, but highly intrigued. The emerald-eyed wizard received a smile in return, but while she explained that she'd planned on refreshing some of her knowledge concerning Charms, her smile disappeared.

"What's up with your hand?"

"Nothing," Harry answered. Truthfully, for once, "It's just ink. I spilled some when I knocked over the bottle," The latter was a lie, but it was embarrassing to know that most likely every single being in this castle was better at writing than he was. He'd keep practising, but he planned on doing it in private.

She took her wand and whispered, "Evanescio!"

Instantly, Harry's hand was clean again. She softly grabbed his hand and inspected it to make sure it really was only some spilled ink.

"That's a nice spell. Can you teach it to me?" the young orphan asked, completely fascinated. A few years, and he might be able to do magic so casually as well.

"Sure, but you need to have some classes with Professor Flitwick first. He instructs new students to theory of magic and will be teaching you the basic wand movements. But I will, as soon as you're ready."

He thanked her, but kept glancing at the books that he would receive in the upper levels.

"Anything you want to know?"

"May I take a look?" For once he sounded like the small, curious boy he seemed to be. Linda smiled kindly, picked up her notes and told him to go ahead.

Eagerly, Harry skimmed the pages trying to take in the shier variety Charms offered. Creating fire, conjuring water, repairing things, immobilize people, nothing seemed impossible. What he noticed, however, was that no book said anything about healing charms, except for a spell that was called 'Ferula' causing him to wonder if they learned anything about healing charms in the future.

He very much hoped so.

That led to another question, "What happens to the kids that are being injured?"

"They're either healed by the teacher as long as it is anything minor or the majority of potions accidents for they are usually treated by Professor Snape. All injuries that are beyond a professor's competence go into the hospital wing to Madame Pomfrey." Linda was a born prefect. She explained all matters in impressive detail without boring you.

He would pay a visit to the hospital wing as soon as he found the time... Not as a patient, but he wanted to learn more about healing with the help of magic. He'd already learned quite a few of the potions by heart that could be used in medical care.

What interested him the most was critical care. He'd had some really close shaves in the past, when it came to helping people and he wasn't willing to risk anybody's life due to lack of commitment to his studies.

But he had time to study now. Yet another luxury that came with living at Hogwarts.

"By the way," Linda suddenly spoke up, "That was a good thing you did yesterday. The constant rivalry between Slytherin and Gryffindor just experienced a serious blow."

Only a few minutes later, as the Hufflepuff basement slowly started to wake up, he was ready to go and eat breakfast with his friends, silently wondering where they'd sit today.

Before he left for the Great Hall, he visited the kitchen where he was greeted with touching enthusiasm. Harry almost laughed, when they were relieved at his apology that he wouldn't be able to help this morning.

"Wow, was I doing such a bad job?" he asked good-naturedly.

"No, no, Harry Potter, sir," Trinky contradicted quickly, "But we... Is difficult. Trinky don't know how to say it."

"My Gobbledegook is good enough. You may try in that language if it's a matter of vocabulary."

"If masters is preparing his own food in kitchen next to his house-elves, they fears their elves to be shàph sekl, sir."

"Oh, Trinky," Harry's shoulders fell down. His face became one of guilt and surprise, "I apologize. athaîa canàn, salà. I never meant to offend you. I'm sorry."

The expression she'd used could not be translated in English. It basically meant 'not to be trusted,' meaning if the master watched his house-elves preparing his food, he was afraid that it was being poisoned.

It was almost impossible to insult a house-elf any further.

"Why didn't you say anything? I would have left," Harry felt his skin prickle as if all blood had left his extremities. He rarely intended to insult others and was very careful to make sure he never did otherwise.

"We were enjoying your visit, Harry Potter, and you said you wanted to work. So we chose silence."

"Again, I'm sorry," Harry was so distressed, he was completely unable to bow properly in form of an apology (completely forgetting they weren't goblins in the first place), "But if I only watch and, I don't know, wash the dishes. Would that be okay?"

"You are offering to do a kitchen's lowest task, only to feel included, sir?"

"To you it's an insult if I prepare food along with you. But I feel like I'm insulting you if I'm just standing by doing nothing but talking while you have to work. It's wrong."

That, they seemed to accept. And so, they promised him to let him wash the dishes next time he visited.

Glad that this issue was out of the world, he said goodbye and left for the Great Hall. When he entered the still rather empty hall, he noticed that his friends already sat down by the Hufflepuff table.

"Good morning," he wished them cheerfully, which was returned and the enthusiasm the greetings were offered gave him a fair idea, which of his friends was an early-riser and who wasn't.

Ron definitely wasn't.

Their conversation was cheerful without saying much for they had talked quite a lot at dinner yesterday. Fred and George joined them a couple of minutes into conversation when a snowy owl flew into the Great Hall. Harry stood long before anybody noticed that his mail was arriving.

She was carrying a rather large package full of letters in several envelopes that threatened to burst any second.

"Thanks, Hedwig," Harry breathed quietly offering her some toast. He released her from the heavy burden and looked at the letters.

There were three envelopes and a package wrapped in brown paper. One of the envelopes was significantly thinner and Harry recognized it to be Kertak's hand-writing. The other envelopes were blank, but they had to come from St Mary's.

"Well, that's an impressive amount of mail on your second day," Blaise said deadpanned, but Harry simply mumbled something about dying for news and opened one of the St Mary's envelopes.

It was full of drawings and short, shakily written missives sent by the younger ones. Sara had drawn a rather nice (for a six-year-old) sketch of Hedwig flying through the window. He recognized Alex's handwriting at the bottom of it that simply said:

'I've been waiting for you'

He swallowed heavily and turned the picture with trembling hands. Again, he recognized Alex's impressively neat hand.

'Love,'

And followed by that in a child's scrawl: 'Sara.'

Carefully, he folded it and opened all the other drawings.

There was one by Gabriel and another by Christopher. Harry smiled when he saw a picture drawn by Johnny but 'by Tommy's request.'

It seemed as if his dear accident prone was well taken care of.

The kids his age had written short missives, though Karl's was missing.

That wasn't surprising. He was a Temporary after all.

Luke's was very nice.

'I'm going to take care of Sara, Harry. We miss you, but we'll be fine, as long as we know you're happy at your new school. Your friends seem to be really nice people. Send them my regards.'

"That's Luke," Harry explained showing them the note, "He's... I've known him for quite a while now. Apart from Grey, Sara and Char, I know him the longest."

Without explaining anything more, he eagerly read the notes and inspected the drawings with a fluttering heart. It felt so good to know that they cared as much as he did.

They were a family, not matter how unconventional it was.

There was a long detailed letter by Sister Augustine telling him that Gabriela was fine at her new home and that there were no other potential couples to look for another family member. She explained that Tommy hadn't quite come to understand why Harry wasn't present, but that this should happen within the next few days, when the little boy noticed that his protector wasn't coming.

Harry's heart clenched violently at that. He just hoped Tommy wouldn't break any bones, or worse, get sick again when winter came and he was still at school.

Pete and Kai both wrote short letters wishing him a good year.

The second envelope again contained sketches, but there was nothing childish about them. It was sketches drawn by an artist and Harry immediately recognized them to be Char's.

Hell certainly hadn't promoted his skills at drawing, but later at St Mary's Harry had supported his unique talent to draw for whether a true likeness of a person in real life, a scenery, or pictures from his imagination... They always looked frighteningly real.

"Those are amazing," Millicent exclaimed, "Was that your goblin friend? I mean, the artist clearly used magic."

"You've never seen paintings created by Leonardo da Vinci, have you?" Hermione asked sounding rather kind, "He was a Muggle and one of the great names in Muggle history. Apart from many things, he was an amazing artist. But, these are marvellous, Harry."

"Yeah," Harry said, carefully laying down each sketch, "That's Char's work. He doesn't know any magic."

There was a picture of Harry's favourite tree, a large sketch of St Mary's orphanage, one of his small chamber (with a sleeping Sara and Luke in it)...

The kitchen including a cooking Sister Margret. Though the picture didn't move, you could see her buzzing around. Harry smiled.

The dining-room the way it looked when they ate breakfast. Harry was able to see his own portrait talking to Grey. His smiled deepened, especially as he saw the title: 'Chaos at Breakfast.'

It was like looking at photographs.

The living room in the evening, right before the little ones had to go to bed. The older kids telling stories and Sister Augustine taking a short nap in her favourite chair.

Then, there were eleven sheets of paper that contained twenty-one portraits.

One for every member of his family (Gabriela included, but Karl and David, the Temporaries, weren't part of it).

At the back his own picture, there was Char's message.

Dear Harry,

I'm not a writer. You know that. But, as you can see, this is my way of telling you what's going on. Alex, Sister Augustine and Kertak will be keeping you on track verbally, I want to do it this way.

Before you ask...

Yes, that's exactly what I've been working on this past month and yes, I'm proud to have been able to keep this from you.

This is my first package. Like this, you have our pictures with you all the time. Next time, I'll be sending you newsletters in the form of drawings and whatever drawing you'd like to have.

Char

PS: Kertak agreed to take a last sketch into his envelope. He liked it very much.

PPS: Glad you've found friends

Eagerly, Harry opened the other envelope and found a picture that, unlike the other pieces, wasn't drawn by pencil, but by carbon and coloured pencils.

It was Harry on a broom. However, Char had drawn the nose long with a wart on it. Additionally, 'Broom Harry' had a hunchback. It looked hilarious. Harry giggled and showed them the piece of art.

"Now I can see the likeness," Fred commented causing the table to laugh. Blaise marvelled about the almost correct sketch of a broom.

"It must have taken him almost an entire day to draw this," the only Hufflepuff currently sitting at the Hufflepuff table stated thoughtfully, "Thanks, Char. That's kind."

Last but not least came Kertak's letter. That one Harry held a little closer for he knew what a private person Kertak was.

His handwriting was neat.

Harry, saràn!

I was very happy to receive your letter. Additionally I want to congratulate you to your choice of a Familiar. Hedwig is a wonderful owl.

I'm glad you have arrived safely and already made new acquaintances that you view as potential friends.

Lacius Longbottom is a symbol in the magical world. Be careful in antagonizing him, but I'm sure you have your reasons to be wary of him. He is a wand-carrier, so I would be cautious as well.

His twin seems timid, but for it was never an issue to you, it won't be for me.

The Weasley family is well-known. They are rather open-minded, especially concerning non-magical humans. William (Bill) Weasley

works at Gringotts as a highly competent curse-breaker and is respected amongst the goblins working with him.

The Zabinis and Bulstrodes have no connection to Gringotts whatsoever, except of course for matters of finances. They seem to be good children.

So does Miss Granger.

I must caution you concerning Mr Nott. I do not want you to be prejudiced, which is why I won't tell you anything further. It is not my story to tell.

However, I beg you to be careful. I am aware you are fond of silence while having company, but please, it is not worth your heart.

You are correct in your assumption that Hogwarts was not only built by humans. Elven kin, goblin kin, even centaurs and the merpeople that live at the bottom of the great lake, have helped creating this castle and its lands.

As for your question why it isn't mentioned by wizards and witches... It's a long story that I cannot possibly explain in a mere letter.

I would be glad if you could explain to me how you've noticed the variety in the first place. A little bit more detail than 'there's too much magic to only be created by four people,' would be good.

The children are well so far. School has started again and Sister Augustine has time to take care of the younger ones.

I'm afraid your absence will be noticed rather soon, but we are prepared for it.

I await your next letter impatiently.

Tacùn,

Kertak

PS: The notebook is magical. Whatever you write in can only be read by you and myself. I would like to continue our correspondence that way.

Harry glimpsed at the package Hedwig brought, but he didn't open it.

He folded the letter and put it into his robes. Shortly, he glanced at Theo, whose expression was guarded, but there was also kindness beneath the distanced eyes.

Kertak meant well... It wouldn't change his conduct towards Theodore.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt breakfast like this, but I was a little worried. I know we've only left the day before yesterday, but I've never been away for longer than a day ever since I live at St Mary's."

Their reactions were a surprise to Harry. Instead of being angry for the impertinence, they asked him to tell them of Char, Kertak and the others, which he did rather thoroughly (without giving too personal information away).

When it was time for them to get up and leave for the first classes in the morning, they filed a fixed date to meet regularly: Tuesday morning for breakfast at seven. And if every other day was occupied, they would make sure to meet at least once a week.

Harry then joined Hermione, Ron and Neville to go outside for Herbology. Hannah, Susan and Eloise joined them.

The lessons were about as great as he'd imaged them. He didn't speak much for it wasn't necessary: Neville was brilliant at the subject.

The round-faced boy was a lot less timid, despite the fact his brother wasn't far away, quietly talking to the two Gryffindor boys that had sat into his boat two days ago.

Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas.

Harry was a bit wary of them, not because they were bad people, not at all, but they seemingly got along very well with Laci.

They weren't the only ones. The entire class was in awe to have the Boy Who Lived so close to them. And Laci was rather smooth.

Actually, it seemed as if Hermione, Neville and Harry were only people who had been on the other side of his arrogance so far.

Lacius Longbottom was also very smart and well read; two hours of Herbology left Harry without a single doubt. When others were watching him, Lacius was also quite a bit fairer towards his brother, even offering him help once or twice (not that Neville needed it at the time).

When the bell rang and the students started to put away their notes and left for their next lesson, Harry suddenly stood in front of Lacius.

The other boy was tall, Harry short.

Sky-blue eyes coldly looked into emerald that hardened instantly. The black-haired boy was good at measuring people up, and he knew that Lacius wouldn't be a person to outsmart easily, but unlike the Boy Who Lived, he had fought before and he was good at it (no matter how much he hated to hurt people).

That knowledge was enough and he looked away.

'Lacius Longbottom is a symbol in the magical world. Be careful in antagonizing him...'

'I know, Kertak, but he's not making it easy.'

The hour the Hufflepuffs had at their disposal before Charms class was used to do homework they'd received for Herbology. And they frustrated Harry.

He knew exactly what he wanted to write, but his hand started hurting rather quickly causing him to be agonizingly slow. His peers were almost finished before he'd written two sentences.

Gritting his teeth, he continued writing and managed to cut himself with the quill.

Not a single sound escaped him.

A lesson learned in Hell.

Hannah noticed the bleeding cut, though, "Harry! Are you okay?"

Astonished, he looked at her. It was just a cut caused by his own stupidity. This tiny scratch wouldn't even scar. How come she was so worried?

"It's nothing." Calmly, he reached into one of his pockets that contained some band-aids (he'd not expected to be hurt after Herbology, but during the lessons when they were dealing with plants), cleaned the cut with a bit of water that appeared next to him (he would have to ask Trinky how they did that) and wrapped the bandage around his 'stabbed' hand.

"Let's go, or we'll be late," Ernie said, curiously eyeing the bandage.

Minutes later, they found the Charms classroom. When they entered, they noticed that Professor Flitwick was already inside. As his peers sat down, Harry approached the tiny wizard, met his gaze and bowed 'student to teacher,' "Santrakai, nashòr."

"Kaisan, kiel," he replied correctly and cheerfully without the slightest surprise (rumours spread fast in this castle). His bow was correct but not stiff.

This man grew up with goblin rules or lived with them for several years.

Good afternoon!

Thank you very much for all the reviews, story alerts and favourite story alerts! I truly appreciate them.

This is the first dedication I've ever made:

This chapter is dedicated to my brilliant Beta, MissGoalie75, who makes sure I don't make too many mistakes, and if I make them, helps me not to repeat them and if I repeat them, kindly reminds me of it. Thanks for your great work last year and I'm looking forward to this one :-) (And thanks for reviewing the last chapter)

A big 'thank you' to all those who've reviewed the last chapter:

Kethatril, In the Mix (Sorry, but Snape is showing up in the next part of the chapter, I promise!), New MoonSunRise, bookworm19065, Scandinavian Shipper, Nanchih, britael, Knight of elves, LoireLoa, Tinsnail, loretta537, A Midsummer Night's Dream!

Please review!

Chapter 8, Part Three: Hogwarts Professors

As Harry turned to sit down, he noticed astonishment in his classmates' faces.

Ernie's eyebrows were furrowed suspiciously, but he caught himself quickly.

First, the tiny wizard read the scroll that contained their names and then introduced himself.

"Theory of magic... Has anybody bothered to read this particularly tedious piece of writing?"

Harry laughed in relief. He'd tried. He really had, but that was the only book that had managed to put him to sleep (natural consequence of reading after a strenuous day or a short night).

"It is my job to introduce you to the basic theories of magic. So, let's start... There are many different ways of how we could categorize magic. Any ideas?"

"Nonverbal and verbal magic, that can be further categorized into magic with or without a wand," Susan offered.

"Good. Now let's look at the subjects you have. How would you categorize them?"

"Herbology isn't really magic at all, neither is History and Astronomy," Hannah chimed in, looking a bit confused, "Potions sounds a bit like cooking, so..."

"I wouldn't make that mistake," Harry contradicted, "Potions... No, clearly a form of nonverbal and wandless magic. In most cases. There are potions that need an incantation or a specific flick of the wand. Potions clearly is magic. Herbology can be magical; some things cannot be done without help. I agree with History, though."

"Charms, Defence and Transfiguration... That can belong to every possible category, it depends on the power of the wizard," Eloise offered.

"Very good," Professor Flitwick beamed at them, "Excellent. Now, any other ideas?"

"Potions, charms, transfigurations, hexes, curses," Ernie stated thoughtfully.

"So, what we had first was a definition of the way we let the magic come to life, now we speak of magic's purposes, except for potions that describe a form of magic. Good idea. Please, discuss the way you have before."

"What about Rune magic?" Justin asked, "I read about that. It doesn't fit into this definition."

Harry didn't say anything while the others were discussing the matter.

Categorizing magic... Impossible. Not if you took Goblin and Elven magic into consideration.

What was magic in the first place? Energy? Life? What about those who couldn't perform it?

What did the magic he'd so far come across of in common, what set the singular occasions apart?

Bricks moving... The warmth of apparition... Potions as liquid magic... Safely landing from a fall...

"Fire, Earth, Air and Water," Harry whispered carefully.

Surprised, Flitwick caught his gaze, "Please explain, Mr Potter."

"All magic, it doesn't matter if Rune magic, potions or a charm, with a wand or without it... It all comes down to the four elements. Wingardium Leviosa – Air, turning a match into a needle – metal, so it's earth. Herbology – closer to earth you can hardly get. Potions – liquids, but I guess every element is important there, fire included. How else could you make the water cook?"

There was silence, before Ernie argued, "What about Reparo?"

"Earth," was the prompt reply given by Eloise, "Whatever you put back together, the element Earth is most likely a part of it."

"But, premonitions... What about divination?"

"Spirit," Harry said, "The fifth element of magic." Kertak had mentioned it once or twice.

"I'd like to break off the discussion for now," Flitwick interfered, his eyes widened and his face looked almost childlike in delight, "Your house deserves ten points for these excellent ideas. Mr Potter, very well argued. Most likely, there is a lot of truth in your idea. Anyhow, certain scholars support another theory that I would like to explain to you." He sounded about as excited about the scholars as Kertak did when talking of wand-carriers in general. Harry was barely able to suppress a grin.

"Mr Waffling and his study group have categorized magic as follows," he cleared his throat and with a short flick of his wand, words appeared at the blackboard, "The principle of how we hold the wand for different purposes. Potions is not taken into consideration, it is a category of its own. Rune magic isn't mentioned at all."

Flitwick's high voice was calm and he spoke slowly giving time for Harry's peers to write things down. The emerald-eyed boy on the other hand took all the information in without writing it down. Instead, he drew senseless figures with a pencil (he'd taken along from the orphanage). Harry had noticed long ago that it was simpler for him to learn things by heart while he was being active. At home he walked, ran, cooked, baked, folded the laundry, carried a toddler, changed a baby's diaper while listening to whatever his peers were talking about.

That had been a problem at Primary school for his teachers hadn't accepted any disturbance of class by physical activity (and if he was only playing with his hands), especially the school he'd attended during his stay at St Mary's. Teachers hadn't been very fond of Harry and stated he was having problems focusing on the lesson. He'd given up trying to make them understand that he was able to remember things better that way.

He hoped that Hogwarts' professors were a bit more open-minded than those he'd come across of so far. In order not to move, he'd noticed that scribbling things helped him just as much as when he was shifting in his seat or played with his hands. As long as he could convince the teachers that he was taking notes, there wouldn't be a problem.

Not that Mr Harper had cared much for his explanations.

"Charms possesses three basic ways of holding a wand: neutral," only the fingertips touched the wand with the index finger on top and the rest to the side. Elegant, but unsteady, "Defensive," his hand curled around the wand, the forefinger straightened, the back of the hand that covered the wand directed at the person or object in front of him, the tip of the wand looked towards the roof, "And offensive." This time, there was no change in the grip, Professor Flitwick merely turned the wand in a half-circle and the tip of the wand was directed at the potential target.

"Transfiguration possesses exactly one way of holding a wand." It looked the way one held a pencil.

"Defence is very closely related to the 'offensive' and 'defensive' ways of holding a wand I've shown earlier for most spells you learn in Defence are in fact charms. There are exceptions, of course. Though most curses are performed by holding the wand 'offensively,' there are some where the wand has to be held differently. Then there is the principle of a hex or, as it is also called, jinx. You hold them like this." The only difference to 'offensive' was that the hand itself was drawn back above the tiny wizards head, "Well, that's it. Transfiguration, neutral, defensive, offensive, hex and the exceptions. Let's practise them."

What followed was a lesson between giggles and really hard practising. Professor Flitwick called one of the five basic ways of holding a wand and they had to do it. It took a moment to get used to it, but nothing bad happened, except for that one time when Justin's wand flew out of his hand wildly spreading sparks, but the adult wizard flicked them away casually as if it happened every day.

Before they were dismissed, they were also introduced into the principle of Wingardium Leviosa. Next lesson, they would learn another category: wand movements.

He asked them to summarize what they'd learned today until Thursday. Before Harry left, he once again bowed 'student to teacher,' which was formally returned. The eleven-year-old was almost outside, when the professor called him back.

"It is a rare occurrence to meet a human knowing the goblin ways," his Gobbledegock was absolutely flawless.

"It is rarer to meet a goblin descendent to be a proud carrier of the wand," Harry replied, not quite sure if he was being impertinent. Amongst goblins, he wouldn't be, but Professor Flitwick was indeed a special case.

He was glad to hear the adult chuckle kindly, "My mother was human, my father a goblin, young Mr Potter. I grew up learning the ways of the goblins for it was at a time the Ministry wasn't too fond of what they called 'mixed blood' and it was unlikely for me ever to be introduced to Hogwarts."

Harry furrowed his eyes in confusion and continued in English, "Ministry, sir?"

Surprised, Professor Flitwick glanced at him, "You have not been told of the Ministry of Magic, Mr Potter?"

"I'm afraid not," then his eyes widened remembering a time, when Kertak had told him that he withheld information in the cases he feared that he wouldn't be able to provide it neutrally, "I've much to learn."

"And that you will," the wizard, that was almost a head shorter than him, smiled confidently, "You may always come to me if you are in need, Mr Potter."

Harry swallowed heavily at yet another blunt offer for help (this was becoming a habit), bowed in thanks and whispered hoarsely, "Dàio, nashòr."

In the afternoon, they had History of Magic. When they sat inside of the classroom, they already knew that it was a ghost who gave those lessons, but they all jumped as Professor Binns entered through the blackboard.

He didn't even bother to look at the name list, but instantly started to talk in the most boring voice Harry ever happened to come across of.

"History of Magic will inform you on every important decision and occurrence that happened ever since the Magical Community of Wizards and Witches in Great Britain was formed," it was amazing how dull he made this sentence sound, "We will begin with particularly important events that are summarized as the 'goblin rebellions.' They will be our topic in the course of this first term." Harry looked up, completely focused.

Kertak had told him of those, had mentioned the events when wizards and goblins alike hadn't acted very honourably on several occasions.

"The first rebellion happened in the country outside the city of London, 1512, and was not a rebellion in the strictest sense, but a group of five goblins who murdered three wizards."

After they'd killed one of the goblin's wives for 'impertinent behaviour.'

The wizards had been extremely loyal members of the Magic for Wizards community, a group of wizards that had wanted to establish the exclusive use of magic by wizards. Ten years after the terrible crime, nobody ever heard of the community again. It was said that this happened thanks to the collaboration between some goblins and witches.

"The next report of violent behaviour by goblins towards wizards and witches happened in Wales, 1545."

Er... What?

Harry shook his head to refocus. No explanations, nothing? It hadn't been mindless slaughter. It had been an act of retribution. Surely, there were other ways and Harry had never been a supporter of the 'eye for an eye' principle, but this sounded as if the five goblins had been nothing but bloodthirsty monsters.

"...Seven Aurors were killed when they attempted to get the skirmish under control." And executed them all in the process. But again, Professor Binns didn't elaborate.

Harry couldn't take it and lifted his hand in protest.

At first, he was being ignored until the ghost finally took notice, "Yes, Mr..."

"Potter. Sir, 1512, the three wizards were part of a community that was called..." As if he hadn't talked at all, the teacher continued with his lecture taking Harry aback. With narrowed eyes, he watched Professor Binns, whose eyes nervously surveyed the room catching emerald every once in a while.

Oh.

That wasn't denial. This man (ghost) knew it. He simply didn't say it. He consciously withheld information.

For the first time, Harry picked up his quill and started to write down everything his teacher said. He wouldn't stand by doing nothing. To his dismay, he saw his peers falling asleep, one by one, under the boring tone of Professor Binns voice. Without noticing, they became defenceless against their History teacher's opinions.

At the end of the lesson, he quickly threw all his things into his bag. He was so angry, his hands trembled.

He knew he wasn't neutral, he knew the customs of non-magical humans and goblins better than the customs of wizards and witches. However, what that ghost had been telling in there, was not the entire truth.

And he knew it!

His eyes darkened as he walked down the corridors in search of Professor Sprout (she'd told them to go to her if there was a problem). Instead of finding her, though, he saw Professor Flitwick turning around a corner.

"Nashòr, ka ramalaî'nèsh peka?" ('Teacher, may I speak with you, sir?')

Surprised, the tiny half-goblin stopped dead in his tracks, "Mr Potter, you seem distressed."

Indignantly, Harry explained what he'd just heard, the attempt of Professor Binns to ignore the goblins' view.

"Professor, I cannot bear this, not without protest. Kertak and Nilràu Natruk have done so much for me." To his astonishment, he saw Flitwick's eyes widen. Did he know them? "I know there have been mistakes on both sides, Kertak knows this, too. He made sure I knew. He's always been fair for he suspected that I was a wizard and he didn't want me to despise my own kin, therefore he never spoke truly ill of the wand-carriers. But if this is what Hogwarts teaches future generations, how can there ever be a consensus between goblins and humans?"

Defeated, the tiny wizard's shoulders fell, "Mr..."

"Don't tell me I'm too young for this, sir. Please, don't insult me that way." Emerald eyes firmly looked into eyes that possessed a very light brown, almost similar to a golden colour.

"May I see your notes?" he was asked instead. Harry handed them over without hesitation. Carefully, his Charms teacher read them through.

"I will take this to the headmaster and we will look for a solution. Furthermore, I want you to talk to Professor Sprout about your protest. There is no need to force this class upon you if you find it so abhorrent."

"Dàio, nashòr," Harry bowed in relief. He wanted to add more, but couldn't think of anything, so he simply said, "Thank you, sir, that was very kind of you. Have a good afternoon."

As he walked away, he heard Professor Flitwick say, "I'm sorry, Severus. You were saying?"

To have flabbergasted Severus Snape was not a feat easily done and the Charms professor was proud of his young pupil to have managed it.

Black, cold eyes bored into his, but Filius Flitwick merely smiled.

"Severus? Do you feel alright?" it was a question innocently asked, but both of them were able to hear the faint amusement in the half-goblin's voice.

"Potter sounds awfully distressed over the less than flattering representation of goblins in History class." The words were spoken quietly, thoughtful. Black eyes fixed on the spot, where Lily and James Potter's son had just disappeared.

"Yes, very much like Lily Evans in the face of injustice, don't you think?" Mischievously, the more than two times shorter man smirked, but it was met with an indifferent expression. However, the thoughtfulness had not yet left his former student's eyes.

"Is it acceptable for you to discuss the matter at dinner, Severus? I would like to meet with Albus as soon as possible."

"Of course, Filius," the Potions Master replied quietly, nodded shortly in form of a goodbye, turned and walked towards the staircases that led into the dungeons.

As soon as he was gone, Flitwick thought over the conversation he'd just had with Mr Potter.

Nilràu Natruk.

A Nilràu taking care of a human child.

Who'd have ever thought?

After having explained himself to Professor Sprout, she'd asked him to be patient and wait until the issue was solved, that she would personally talk to the headmaster. Their readiness to assist their students' worries surprised Harry; he couldn't remember the last time he'd ever asked for assistance by an adult.

It was strange and would take some time to get used to, but the knowledge of having the possibility to approach someone warmed his heart. Not that he hadn't been able to go to Sister Augustine, but he never did, simply because she had too much on her hands in the first place.

He wasn't the only one to think so. Two weeks into his arrival at St Mary's the duties of solving problems had been split between him and Alex.

Currently, he was in his Common Room finishing his homework... He wanted to do it right; he wanted to do it well. By now he was able to recite everything he planned on writing for Herbology, Charms and History. His contemporaries were all finished and currently either playing games or were out studying.

"Don't you want to go somewhere quiet?" Susan asked him with a smile, "It's pretty loud in here."

"It kind of reminds me of home. Apart from the sleeping hours it's never quiet, so I'm used to it," he replied, returning her smile.

"You've been working on it for two hours, do you want me to help you?" Her eyebrows were slightly furrowed in worried. It was her genuine concern that kept him from outright refusing her.

"You can't unless you have an extra wrist at your disposal that you can lend me," he explained, his frustration not evident but recognizable, "I'm not used to writing."

"Really? But I thought you were Muggleborn. Didn't you go to Primary school, or something? We are taught by our parents and depending on their education we do better or worse at first, but I always thought that Muggleborns go to school," she looked at him in confusion.

"Usually, we do," but street kids weren't welcomed with open hands. Besides, even if they did let you back home, school didn't exactly provide enough food to nurture your friends, "I didn't really. I learned to read elsewhere and there never really was the need to write anything, so I'm a bit unpractised at it." It wasn't exactly wrong, just not entirely honest.

"But you can write and read?"

"Yes, just the former very, very slowly. It's tiring," he answered truthfully. Without asking, she sat down telling him that it'll come, he'd just have to practise every day. She even offered to help him,

which he'd gladly come back to as soon as the feeling to his hand returned. She smiled and went her way.

Unlike the adults' help, hers didn't confuse him at all. Friends and friends-to-be helped each other whenever they could. That was the way things were.

It took him another hour to finish his homework, his hand red. Hadn't it hurt so much, he could have almost said that the last ten minutes passed a bit less strenuous than before. Maybe, Susan was right. He just had to practise every day.

Dinner would start in about an hour allowing him to seek out another place of Hogwarts.

The hospital wing.

He had no idea where exactly he was supposed to go. He left the Common Room and walked upstairs towards the Great Hall. He passed several older students on his way, some of whom he recognized to be Hufflepuffs. One or two seemed to remember his face as well for they smiled at him when he passed.

As he turned around a corner, he noticed another presence doing the same. Swiftly he turned aside thereby avoiding a direct collision with the stranger. It was that blond boy who'd been called Malfoy at the sorting. Two large boys who looked at him gloomily flanked him. Harry had encountered enough bullies to know that they were used to apply their size and strength not to protect but to put fear into those weaker than them. It was enough to make him wary.

"Watch it," the blond boy sneered, he looked up and down Harry's wardrobe (his new cloak covered the majority of his shabby clothes, but his shoes were worn, and he'd opened the cloak for it had been too warm in the Hufflepuff Common room revealing his old, pampered shirt and the oversized trousers he'd received from Char several years ago) and his lips curled into a nasty smirk, "It's remarkable how the standards at this school have declined."

Maybe, it was due to absurdity of the statement itself or because the son managed to speak just as arrogantly as the other Malfoy he'd met (most likely his father), Harry didn't care. He snickered, "You've been here for what, two and a half days and you already sound like

an old man. How is it possible to compare something you cannot possibly judge? Be careful copying the opinions of adults, it might keep you from having thoughts on your own."

The pale boy looked at him flabbergasted, but he regained composure quickly. An emotion Harry couldn't quite grasp flickered over the boy's face, before the sneer returned, "Be careful, Potter," Malfoy murmured quietly. So, he'd already been mentioned by Laciuz, "It's unwise to make powerful enemies so early in life. You do know whom you've opposed, don't you? And I am Malfoy, Draco Malfoy. My family is one of the most powerful Pureblood families in the country. It would be foolish to get on the bad side of either of us, the Longbottoms or the Malfoys."

"Neville's my friend," or at least as good as, "So I'm hardly opposing the Longbottoms, I'm just not particularly fond of Laciuz, and as for what you said... The Wizarding Society works with clans as well? That's interesting." Kertak had always been very secretive when it came to Goblin Society, but he did know that clans or, as they were also called, kinships were an important part of it. It was fascinating to see that the wand-c... wizards and witches worked with a similar principle.

"What?" Confusion was written all over the boy's face.

On the other hand, maybe it wasn't exactly the same principle.

"Well, you just said your family has a lot of influence. Clan is more commonly used to describe not only mother, father and children but grandfather, grandmother, aunts and uncles, cousins as well. You just said your family is powerful, so I assumed that Wizarding Society is built upon the principle of different clans. It seems as if I'm mistaken," Harry shrugged. Professor Flitwick had mentioned a Ministry earlier. He'd definitely have to get into this.

"Laciuz was right," Harry lifted his eyebrows at the scathing tone, "Whoever introduced you to the magical world did a lousy job."

Without knowing it, Malfoy had entered extremely dangerous territory. Insulting Harry's friends was a very stupid thing to do. His tolerance wasn't very high for that.

"What, do you want to guide me, too?" Harry asked with a very small smile. His green eyes blazed coldly. They spoke a clear warning and back home he'd be left alone within seconds. He felt his muscles tense as one of the large boys moved almost imperceptibly to the side and behind him to cut off a possible escape route.

Fool!

"As if I would interact with a worthless orphan like yourself," Malfoy sneered coldly. Harry's fists clenched.

'Get yourself a grip! It's not the first time an Other called you worthless. Just let him, step away!'

And he did. Fighting would lead to hurting this oaf still standing in the same position as he had before. It bothered him more than usual to be called worthless, maybe just because he hadn't heard it in six months.

The last time by Sullivan.

Slowly, Harry shook his head as he felt the other large boy attempting to close the circle. Before any of them could react however, Harry ducked beneath the 'bodyguards' and swept around the corner.

Instead of running away he leaned against the wall and closed his eyes.

Do not be seen!

He heard the startled sound uttered by Malfoy and his companions; for a couple of Others, remarkably fast reaction in order to pursue him.

As always, they walked right past him allowing him to continue his journey.

Not far away, he heard a muffled sob and immediately walked towards it. There was a young girl, maybe a year or two older than him, who held her hand a little awkwardly and was accompanied by no other than Gabriela Cornell, one of Slytherin's Prefects, as Millicent had told him.

"Everything okay?" Harry asked worriedly, approaching them quickly.

Gabriela looked at him no less suspiciously than yesterday morning, but she didn't hold her gaze as long this time, "Yes, everything's under control. There was just a little accident in Potions, wasn't there, Sybille?"

The other girl just nodded looking rather pale. Harry furrowed his eyebrows and drew closer. There was a pretty nasty gash on her right arm, as if burned.

Harry reach forward out of habit, ready to ease the pain, but then noticed something strange. Heat radiated from the wound causing the young wizard to pull back his hand. This wound was blazing angrily.

"Potion?"

"Yes, Confusing Concoction," Sybille muttered then she hissed in pain, only to whimper again, "I confused ash with oak causing to heat the potion too quickly and a splash hit my arm. I hate to have Potions lessons so late in the afternoon. My focus just isn't the same."

"The professor is already looking for a solution, don't worry," Gabriela said and as she continued talking, Harry continued examining the hurt arm.

It was strange. The heat wanted to penetrate her arm and her own body temperature just gave way without fighting back, but there was something holding it back. Harry focused a little more, and there it was, that faint bit of shimmering air whenever magic was used outside of a body. Then he could feel it, next to the aggressive, penetrating power; there was a calm, soft but equally powerful layer over her arm, separating the body from the attacking energy.

Suddenly, he was glad not to have intermingled with this in order to soothe her pain. This was way beyond the things he knew about healing.

"What did he do?" Harry asked curiously as they started to walk towards the infirmary.

"Who told you to come with us?" Gabriela asked sharply yet Harry didn't even blink. His question, she ignored.

"I was just looking for the Infirmary myself, so..." He didn't get further for the tall girl advanced him and softly grasped his hand that was still covered in ink.

"No, I'm not hurt," the young boy told the Prefect firmly, "I just wanted to see where it is. My ink's red."

"Writing your contracts with blood, Potter?" Gabriela asked with a smirk, which he returned. They both stopped doing so when they heard Sybille whimpering again.

Harry couldn't watch this, he didn't know how long it took to get to the hospital wing and he had no wish to find out with a hurt individual next him. He couldn't do anything with the wound for there was the danger of ripping up the protective layer. But pain was difficult because it was coursing through the body, namely to the brain.

It was strange, really, there were three centres in a human (or goblin, or house-elf, or cat, or any other being that breathed) body, the brain, the heart and somewhere right above the hip ('Where a mother carries her unborn child'), but though your heart could feel pain, it was always connected to the head.

The brain therefore was the centre for pain, speech, moves, everything. It was odd that poetry always spoke of the heart when it simply existed to make sure your body was receiving enough blood. Still, without the heart there was no life, so they weren't wrong.

The lowest centre he couldn't really name and he'd found absolutely no book on the subject. Maybe, Hogwarts' matron, Madame Pomfrey, knew something about it.

For now, all that mattered was the head, though.

Carefully, he laid a hand on Sybille's shoulder that held her injured arm. As they walked (his friends had long ago found out that he was faster when they grew absolutely still), he tried to soothe the constant assault of heat shooting from her injury to her head. It was

a bit like blowing at a hot soup. He didn't want it to become cold, but it had to adapt to the rest of her body. The moment he felt her relax, he knew this would do until they were in the library.

Neither Sybille nor Gabriela noticed anything, Sybille only that the pain lessened somewhat.

"You didn't answer my question, you know," Harry commented quietly, "What did he do?"

"Who?" Sybille asked in confusion.

"Professor Snape, I mean, he didn't just send you up here, right?" He was quite sure that this layer-trick didn't come from Sybille, it was a stranger's magic.

"Well, he sent for Gabriela?" it sounded more like a question than a statement. Harry frowned, "He just told me to go to the hospital wing."

"He didn't draw his wand at all?"

Definitely not a man he wanted to cross, then.

"Yes, to get rid of my potion and all that, but he never pointed his wand at me," she shuddered a bit at the thought. Blaise and Millicent hadn't gone into further detail when it came to their Head of House, but obviously that respect they were talking about bordered on fear.

On the other hand, if the man were every bit as icy calm with a wand as that type of man handling a pickpocket, Harry would shudder at the thought of being at wand-point as well.

Before he could really get lost in thought, they opened the doors that seemed to lead into the infirmary.

Madame Pomfrey, a middle-aged lady with kind but very strict eyes (reminding him more of Sister Margret than Sister Augustine), looked at them and sighed, "Severus told me this was likely to happen. Scheduling Potions so late into the afternoon! Stupid. Come here, child and sit down." The latter was spoken very softly and Harry decided to like this person immediately.

She extracted her wand and flicked it over the wound, pierced her lips thoughtfully before she looked at the three children in front of her, "You two may leave. Thank you for bringing her here," she said to Gabriela and Harry, but Harry immediately explained that he wanted to talk to her after she'd finished with her work on Sybille.

At first, she looked at him a bit puzzled, which was swiftly replaced by shier bewilderment and worry. The woman dismissed Gabriela and told the other two to stay put.

"Thanks for bringing me here, Gabriela," Sybille whispered quietly, but she received a kind smile from the rather sever older girl.

Definitely a typical Alex.

Alexandra would have fit wonderfully into Slytherin.

The moment, the Slytherin Prefect left, Madame Pomfrey returned with a potion. She poured it carefully over the injured arm and Harry could feel the acidity disappear. Then, she waved her wand and that strange layer was gone as well.

A moment later, Madame Pomfrey took another potion and let a drop fall on the wound. Harry quickly noticed that this didn't bother Sybille at all. Then, the matron tapped the arm right above the injury and the wound sealed within seconds.

Harry's eyes widened in awe. It seemed so casual, as if it was nothing at all. Harry couldn't seal wounds; he could only make them stop bleeding... Sometimes.

'Don't move! Don't move! I'm a get help!'

'Help me...'

Painfully, Harry looked away. If only he had known what to do back then. That Accidental Magic surely hadn't helped and he'd been so terribly scared. Maybe, that magical core of his simply wasn't active at all.

"Child? Child?" the matron sounded rather worried when she was forced to call him a second time.

"Yes? I apologize, Madame. I was lost in thoughts," memories more like, but that wasn't an issue for now. To his surprise, he noticed the door to the Hospital wing close. Sybille seemed to have left already.

"Do you not... Oh, child!" she softly took his hand, only to frown a moment later, "That isn't blood," she was definitely experienced, "What can I do for you?"

"My name is Harry Potter," she only nodded as if that news didn't surprise her at all, "And I am a First Year student at Hogwarts, Madame. I would very much like to learn from you, if that is possible."

She stared at him as if hearing such a request for the first time. Harry gulped.

Was he being rude? He wasn't sure. Dealing with adults wasn't his thing. He'd come across many adults in his life, but very few whom he spoke more than one or two sentences with.

He decided to continue his halfway prepared speech, "I live in orphanage in London, where I received the task of making sure its inhabitants obtain medical care if needed. However, sometimes the doctor is too far away," or (in Sullivan's case) you were not allowed to bring them into a hospital or (in St Mary's case) it was simply too expensive to get stitches for mere gashes, "Therefore, I've acquired some knowledge in first aid. I would like to improve and advance my understanding of healing."

"You are a First Year, you say? This is your first week? There is no way for me to teach you anything just yet. First, you have to learn the basics of charms and transfiguration before I could teach you any healing or diagnostic spells," she didn't sound condescending at all, flabbergasted described her expression a lot more precisely.

"That I understand. I mean, I've just seen you use two spells and two different potions for what seems a superficial wound." Wherever that strange layer had come from, it had made sure the wound didn't go deeper and the matron had known of its existence (how else could she have removed it?). He couldn't wait to learn more about this, "But I could help you do the inventory or clean the medical

supply, I don't know, Madame. I would just like to learn from you very much."

She looked at him in surprise before she examined him for a long time, "Very well, Mr Potter. You will very soon see that regular classes are demanding enough, therefore I think it wise to only meet on Sunday afternoon at five o'clock for this is when I actually do the inventory. As soon as you've settled in and given your interest is as keen as it is for the moment, you may help me on a regular school day."

Harry thanked her profusely, at some point he was pretty sure to have said 'Dàio!'

Her confusion definitely seemed to say so.

Happily, Harry left the Infirmary a moment later. Additionally to finally learn more about healing, he also had the feeling of having just made him a bit more useful.

The rest of the week had their ups and downs.

Rock bottom he'd hit on Wednesday morning in Defence class.

The pain he'd felt that first night at Hogwarts didn't return, but he was so on edge the entire lesson, he had problems keeping in his seat. Even if he had the ability to listen to the stuttering speech of the teacher, he couldn't focus. His instincts told him, screamed at him, 'Run, you bloody idiot! Run.'

Having such a feeling for two hours was extraordinarily strenuous, and as he was finally able to escape the classroom, he was so exhausted, he failed horribly at focusing on Transfiguration where they had been supposed to repeat their performance on Monday. Transfiguration took focus and energy, he lacked in both for the entire lesson.

Professor McGonagall had actually asked him, whether he felt ill, but he'd declined. He didn't feel ill; he just... had a really bad feeling.

He knew better than to tell a teacher of his mistrust concerning one of their colleagues.

Thankfully, Susan and Hannah were kind enough to help him with his homework they'd received that morning. They gave him their notes, discussed the lessons and in the end, they even finished their homework together. Those two were true Hufflepuffs for they were extremely patient with his abysmally slow writing. This kindness had prompted Harry to take them along to Hagrid, who'd welcomed them with open arms.

Harry was particularly fond of Fang for he loved dogs. He was neither what people called a dog person or a cat person. He cherished them both equally for what they were... Dogs were partners, cats were company.

A good afternoon was followed by a wonderful Charms lesson where they learned that Waffling divided each category into subdivisions concerning the principle of 'wand-movement.' Very interesting, especially as they were allowed to practise them a bit.

There was just one tiny problem. His quill kept moving whenever he practised flick after swish. He learned very quickly not to do so.

Professor Flitwick luckily hadn't noticed it.

Astronomy was interesting, but the stories of the constellations weren't told in the first two lessons, only the names of the planets.

Before Harry was able to grasp what was happening, it was already Friday. This week had passed far too quickly. He couldn't wait to write Kertak and Char of his week full of wonders and magic. He missed them even more than he'd thought possible (and he'd expected quite an amount of pain), but thankfully his newfound friends from Gryffindor, Slytherin and Hufflepuff (Hannah and Susan weren't part of their group, but they were the ones talking to Harry in regular class) kept him from feeling wistful.

Though, they never had the possibility to eat as a group for the rest of the week, they occasionally met separately for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Hermione he'd once met in the library and Ron had introduced him to chess over their long lunch-break on Thursday. He wasn't very good at it, while Ron seemed to be a genius at it. Blaise had joined them a little later and Ron soon found a good opponent to test new strategies. Anyway, he still insisted on teaching Harry whatever he knew.

It was Friday and Harry was about to meet the only teacher whom he hadn't met personally yet. Together with Hannah and Susan, they used the underground corridor that Cedric had showed them the evening before that would lead them to the dungeons beholding the Potions classroom. To their shock however, the walls must have somehow changed their structure for they suddenly stood in front of a blind alley.

"Oh no," Susan murmured, "Cedric said this only happened on Tuesdays. He specifically warned us not to take this route on Tuesdays."

They were late. Classes would begin in ten minutes. Harry determinedly shouldered his cauldron and told them to wait. He took a step forward and touched the wall.

'Would you please move aside? We're late for class,' he thought pleadingly, but the wall didn't even respond. Stubbornly, it stayed right where it was.

No bricks.

Harry drew the Rune for 'transparency,' but for a moment it seemed as if the wall was laughing at him. He had no time for this.

They would have classes with Professor Snape any minute, and if the man were the kind of person he expected him to be, delay would be interpreted as utterly rude.

'Move aside,' he thought determinedly, laid his hand on the wall and pushed. It gave in allowing the Rune to do its work. Like this, they were all allowed to walk right through it.

Both girls looked at him seemingly rather shocked. They didn't have time to linger though.

Quickly, Harry ran across the corridors and had to stop a few corners later for his friends were falling back. He reached the door and opened it the minute their Potions professor entered the classroom through another path. Harry stood still for a moment.

They weren't late, but they weren't seated like everybody else either. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Laciuss' sneer. Neville, who sat right next to him, looked worried. Harry's gaze was mainly fixed on black eyes in front of him; he nodded respectfully and soundlessly advanced the closest table. His friends followed his example, though not as quietly as he did. It didn't seem to matter. The tall man's eyes were fixed on him. Harry couldn't determine what the man thought.

His eyes were cold and empty reminding him of dark tunnels. Never before had he seen a person possessing an eye-colour so dark, one was inclined to call them black.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making," he spoke barely above a whisper, but Harry was enthralled as if he'd been spelled.

The man's voice was deep and quiet; his tone was silky, almost soft with a rough edge to it. He was a storyteller, plain and simple, one of the few deserving to be called such. Sully had had a similar voice, but its silk had covered up the rough edge. Harry knew that he'd never have a problem listening in this particular class. He'd remember every single word.

"As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses..." Flitwick, McGonagall, Sprout, they all loved their subject with passion, however Snape's soft tone spoke of life itself, "I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death – if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach." The last sentence was like a bucket full of cold water splashed into Harry's face.

He surely knew how to work with his voice.

That was a very dangerous man.

Then, Snape took the class register and spoke their names. When Laciuss' name was spoken, the entire room held their breath, but to Harry's great relief it was dismissed with nothing more than the blink of an eye. Laciuss didn't look very happy at the dismissal.

On went the list until, "Harry Potter." There was an edge to the name, Harry instantly was wary of. The wizard, no matter how quietly he'd murmured it, had almost spit 'Potter'.

Their eyes met again, and Harry was quite aware that the man knew his name. He managed to force his features to remain blank. He'd learned long ago that demonstrating fear in the face of a predatory being was never a good idea. He was still convinced that Professor Snape wasn't cruel, but carnivorous animals weren't either, yet they still killed their prey and defended their cubs to death.

Or Fletchlins, as Blaise had told him they were called.

Before the silence started to disquiet his students, the Potions professor continued with the name register.

As he ended, Harry felt his heart starting to pound.

And not in a good way.

"Potter," it was frightening and fascination at once to listen to such a silky tone when it spat a word, "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Harry's eyes went wide for a moment. He hadn't expected the lesson to start with a quiz. He didn't know what the combination resulted into, but he knew what each plant did.

"Asphodel itself belongs to the lilies," 'my mother's name.' As soon as he'd heard her name, he'd specifically searched Lillian plants and their meaning in his schoolbooks, "Its root has sedative qualities, especially in powdered form," powdering a root enhanced its effect, as far as he'd read in his Potions book, "And wormwood causes depression if not then destruction of the nerves, but the latter is avoided due to making it an infusion. I'm not sure what the exact result is called, but it definitely puts you to sleep or causes you to become immobile at the very least."

While he talked not avoiding the teacher's gaze for a second, he tried his best to find out whether or not he was right with his interpretations.

When he'd started to speak, the man had stiffened a bit, a sentiment followed by surprise only to become unreadable again.

Snape was quiet for a moment before he spoke again, "What did you do, Mr Potter? Learn all the ingredients without glancing at the possible combinations?"

Harry was at loss for a moment. What did he want to hear? He hadn't learned the book by heart; he'd lacked the time to do so.

He hadn't known this was a requirement at this school. Still at loss, he remained silent.

"Well, if you don't answer, then please answer the following question: where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

Bezoar, all he knew was that it saved humans from most poisons, but if used on a goblin, it could be deadly. The latter had been a mere side-note in the book, but Harry had marked it. However, he was completely unable to say, where it came from.

"I don't know, sir." Out of the corner of his eyes he saw Hermione's hand lifted and smiled at the sight of his enthusiastic friend. It froze instantly, when he saw the Potions professor's eyes narrow dangerously.

"I wonder why your lack of knowledge amuses you, Potter."

Harry managed to keep his eyes open, but as despair overcame him, it was hard not to.

Why? Why did adults always misread his actions?

Suddenly, he heard a satisfied snicker knowing exactly whose voice it was. He clenched his jaw, but remained still. Snape held his gaze as he spoke, "And I simply fail to understand why it would amuse you, Mr Longbottom. Perhaps, you want to answer the question in Mr Potter's place."

"Bezoar is a stone inside of a goat's stomach," the sky-blue eyed young wizard said with a slight sneer playing around his mouth, "But Potter grew up in Muggle London, sir," Harry turned his head quickly

enough to make his neck hurt. He stared at the Longbottom brothers and noticed Neville looking miserable.

Orphan, Malfoy had already voiced it. Laciuss had told him, who'd been informed by Neville. But they couldn't know he'd lived on the streets. There was not a single person living inside of this castle who knew this, not for sure. Professor Dumbledore and Hagrid had seen enough to suspect it, especially Professor Dumbledore, who'd seen Sister Augustine's notes (who did have her suspicions, though he'd never confirmed it), but Laciuss couldn't possibly know... "He probably never left the safety of his orphanage, sir, asking him about the contents of a farm animal's stomach might be a bit much."

So, he didn't know anything. Harry was so relieved, he didn't even get angry. For a moment, he was just grateful that this piece of information wasn't news to the majority in this class.

He despised Laciuss' tone, though. It wasn't a sneer, or condescending, rather compassionate, really, but it had a false edge to it.

Snape turned his head towards the Boy Who Lived. Either that child was arrogant to the point he lacked common sense or he was suicidal for his false, compassionate smile didn't disappear when the tall man approached him.

"Longbottom, Potter's upbringing is not topic of this class, and it might be wise not to speak of matters entirely unknown to you. As it is, you may answer one last question... What is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

"Wolfsbane is a draft that was mentioned two months ago in the Daily Prophet for people suffering from lycanthropy," Laciuss said promptly, "Monkshood is a plant."

Wrong.

Harry saw Snape's lips curl ever lightly, "Perhaps, I shall repeat my question. Potter, could you please tell me the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

The eleven-year-old had no idea whether or not Snape wanted him to be able to answer the question.

'Monkshood, wolfswood, aconite,

Three words, one fate in sight,

Bane of wolf and hood of stone,

Cerberus spit on soil,

And up you grow!'

Thank you, Kertak for your great ability at telling stories.

"It's the same plant, sir, also called aconite, it's highly poisonous."

An almost imperceptible nod came from the Potions professor as if it caused him physical pain to admit Harry was right.

"From now on I suggest you to be a bit more careful at prematurely judging your peers, Mr Longbottom. What you were talking about was Wolfsbane Potion and, unless one intends to poison someone suffering from lycanthropy I advise you not to use wolfsbane in said potion. There is no need to worry for it is unlikely for you to ever be capable of brewing it."

Harsh.

The man could certainly fight simply with the mere power of words, or voice.

"The both of you lack in precision. Though Potter was correct in his musings concerning the ingredients, he failed to mention that asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. Longbottom on the other hand simply failed to listen by assuming that I was talking about the Wolfsbane Potion, not the plant. Well? Why aren't you all copying that down?"

At that, Harry lifted his eyebrows. Did he mean the insults or the information? Gingerly, he picked up his quill and started writing, but before his first sentence was written, most of his peers were already finished. Determinedly, he continued writing when Snape continued with the lesson announcing they would be brewing a potion to cure

boils until the bell rang. Harry was incredibly grateful for the man's voice for Harry registered every spoken word effortlessly in his mind allowing him to continue with his notes.

Bezoar is found...

He spoke of the potion they were about to brew before he declared the general rules they would have follow, "The first rule seems rather simple at first sight, but there will be those among you unable to obey..."

Powdered root of asphodel...

"You have to pay attention," the latter he spat, and Harry instantly knew that he was talking to him.

'Please, don't be another Mr Harper,' Harry thought feeling a little desperate. Harper at least had been stupid enough for Harry to outsmart, he doubted to succeed in that should he decide to oppose the wizard in front of him.

Warily, the orphan looked straight into those black eyes, and for a moment he thought to have seen a glimmer inside of the dark tunnels.

"Be so kind to repeat what I've said these past few minutes," his tone was icy.

"For the rest of the lesson you are inquired to brew an undemanding potion to cure boils," Harry quoted effortlessly, he even adjusted the melody of his speech to the professor's voice, "It is simple for it only contains six different ingredients. You shall see that most potions acquire ten to twelve different components..."

"Detention, Potter, for mocking a teacher." He hadn't meant to mock him; he'd simply done as asked!

"You will report to me tonight at six o'clock, inside of this classroom." Harry's heart started to pound uncomfortably.

That wasn't good.

Alone with male adults, human adults, in an enclosed room was never ever good. Outside (beneath the tree at St Mary's with an elderly adult) was no problem. He had the possibility to run. When the doors closed, on the other hand, he was entrapped.

What if there was a Sullivan behind the cold features? What if he'd read the man incorrectly?

Professor Snape continued with his lecture telling them that it was important they followed the instructions thoroughly and that he would tolerate no experiments inside of this classroom.

An inflexible being in the subject beholding the most potential... Wonderful.

"...That is until you reach a level where experiments become essential to understand the art of potion-making in its entire beauty, a level, I'm afraid, only few of you will be able to reach."

And maybe, he just didn't want any accidents in his class.

A few minutes later, they were put into pairs safe for Harry, who remained alone and started chopping and weighing the six ingredients necessary.

Lacius seemed to be doing all the work alone, mainly because he kept hissing at Neville whenever he dared to touch an ingredient. It pained Harry to see his friend so subdued.

He wasn't thrilled with the fact that Neville had told his brother of Harry living at an orphanage, but he hadn't exactly asked his new friends to keep it a secret, either. Despite that, who was he to demand loyalty of Neville thereby forcing him to break loyalty to his twin brother? He wasn't that cruel. He wouldn't ever break his loyalties either, not for people he hardly knew.

Snape swept around between the desks and criticised everyone in the room. Only with Hermione, he found little for censure. Harry was told to stew his horned slugs more thoroughly, but otherwise, he was left alone.

By the end of the lesson, they all were inquired to hand in a vial of the potion what they'd managed so far, and Harry was pleased to

notice that he managed to finish the potion. It was a bit off-colour, but not by far.

Weren't he supposed to return to this classroom this evening and hadn't Professor Snape's reaction been so hostile, Harry might have left the dungeons with a satisfied smile.

So, the first encounter between Snape and Harry is over. Others will follow. I hope you've enjoyed it as much as I did by writing it.

Thank you sooo much for the reviews, they always make my day!

It's early in the morning, so I don't dare writing more since I don't do coherent that time of day -)

Please, review!

Chapter 9, Part One: Of Loyalty, Threats and Detentions

"Harry," Neville called behind him as he was about to follow his peers to another History of Magic lesson (per Professor Sprout's request, but that didn't mean he was looking forward to it). Slowly, he stopped and turned around.

He tried not to look annoyed.

'It's his brother,' he chastised himself, 'It's as if you weren't allowed to talk to Kertak and Char about them. But still...'

"I'm sorry about Laci's behaviour," the round-faced boy blurted out, "I didn't know he'd be using this kind of information against you, in front of everybody, I mean."

'Bullocks!'

"You know that's a lie. He's your brother, you know his actions better than anybody," the moment the vicious tone escaped him, he felt sorry, especially when he saw Neville flinch slightly. It was like kicking a puppy.

"Look," he managed to make his voice sound much softer, "I'm sorry. I have no right demanding anything of you. We hardly know each other," they'd been 'acquainted' as toddlers, though, and they'd recognized each other even before Harry had realized the boy's identity. And yet... "He's your brother. I only have brothers of choice... Out of friendship becomes brotherhood, that's how I gained my family. I don't know what it's like to just have them, so I don't know what you owe them. What you need to understand on the other hand, is that Laci has insulted me, twice actually, and I can't know whether or not he'll be doing it again. So, if I'm telling you something and ask you to keep it to yourself... Will you?"

He didn't want to cause a sibling's quarrel, but he didn't want to watch his every word around Neville either.

The boy, who was slightly taller and better nourished than he was, lowered his head in shame. Then, he looked and said firmly, "Of course, I will!"

Harry grinned a little, "Alright then! Let's go to class." They departed only a few corridors later where Ron, Hermione were talking to Susan and Hannah.

History of Magic didn't get any better. Well, he hadn't expected to change things within three days, but this class made him angrier than he'd thought possible.

Professor Binns seemed to have taken it upon himself to teach them only the most vicious, dishonourable actions the goblins had done in the course of the Great Rebellions. Harry's lifted, left hand was being ignored the entire time, when he rattled down dates and names, but he kept it up the entire time. He'd done more strenuous things when he'd been much younger.

Suddenly, a sheet of parchment was handed over by Susan.

What's the question?

He wrote it down as quickly as possible and handed it back.

She read it and lifted her hand confidently.

"Yes?" Binns asked, when he finally noticed her.

"So, Emeric the Evil gave no warning at all, he simply decided to barge into that village and kill every male wizard occupying it?" her question was asked with lifted eyebrows and Harry felt a rush of gratitude and respect. He smiled at her.

Binns looked taken aback then returned to his usual lecture ignoring her question completely. That resulted in Hannah lifting her hand, repeating the question... He still didn't budge and kept talking.

Justin, Ernie and Eloise joined them as well and waited patiently until Binns suddenly snapped, "What is this?"

"We've asked you a question, sir, we'd merely be grateful for an answer," Harry explained patiently, but his green eyes flashed. Binns looked at him with dazed eyes before he seemed to recognize him.

His eyebrows narrowed, "You again. I'm merely stating historical facts, Mr Pointer, be assured that I did not lie to you. Now as we were..."

"It's Potter, and no, you weren't lying. You're just wilfully misleading us, sir. I've read parts of the history book for this class," as soon as having found time after their disastrous first lesson, "It's all nice and shiny, but not a word of the goblins' motivation to start this rebellion in the first place," Harry commented. The History teacher's eyes looked almost awake, while he spoke.

"Careful, Mr Parker, disrespecting a teacher will only get you in trouble," the warning tone was imperceptible for those who had no experience with threats (meaning every child currently sitting in this classroom with the exception of Harry).

"It's Potter, Professor Binns," Harry spoke a bit more vehemently than before. The man had studied the Goblin Rebellions. He simply had to know what was in a name. He wondered whether the teacher noticed that he'd offered a truce by accepting his teacher's name, "And I was not disrespecting you," 'You'd definitely know if I had...' "I'm merely suggesting you should..."

"Thank you, Mr Profanus. You are dismissed," he interrupted in a bored tone, but his eyes caught emerald, and Harry was almost sure they were glimmering vindictively.

That was a downright insult on three different levels.

Interrupting him...

Ignoring the name, polluting it by using the word 'profanity' as a name...

Dismissing him...

That ghost certainly knew how to play dirty, and if Harry lashed out now, he'd be punished, while Binns simply could claim not to have willingly insulted him. His jaw set, he quietly packed his things. Susan stood up and did the same, followed by Hannah and Eloise. Justin flashed a huge grin as he laid his quill aside and picked up his bag. Seemingly puzzled, Ernie and Sally-Anne followed their actions.

"What are you doing, Ms Barks?" Binns angrily asked Susan.

"Oh, didn't you just dismiss us, sir?" was the innocent reply.

Harry grinned.

The House of loyalty, indeed.

Flustered, Binns continued the lecture as if nothing happened, his dismissal of Harry seemingly forgotten. The entire class was listening to the ghost's boring tone (a first in History of Magic ever since this class was taught by Professor Binns, alive or dead), and they threw occasional glances at Harry, who either shook his head or sighed silently whenever Binns overlooked yet another fact.

Susan handed Hannah the parchment she'd received by Harry stating that Emeric the Evil had warned the village of their attack a week in advance. It had been an important tactical move in the rebellion, but they'd made sure that the village was evacuated. Ten out of fifteen killed wizards had been part of an organisation formed to stop the rebellion, two wizards had been killed when they'd started to attack Emeric's crew from behind, one wizard had been murdered for 'showing disrespect' and Emeric the Evil had been punished for the act of dishonour in the aftermath of the victory. Two others had tried to save their belongings and had died in the process. Eight witches had been captured and later released as there was no female goblin in Emeric's squad and it was forbidden by Goblin Law to kill a member of the opposite sex for any other reason than self-defence or acceptable retribution.

By the end of the lesson, Harry had informed his peers quite a bit of what Binns didn't say. As they left and the door closed behind them, Harry thanked them all for their support, but was dismissed by Susan immediately.

"It's nothing. I've heard this is the most boring class in Hogwarts. My aunt, who's the most patient and hard-working person I know, told me she'd been unable to stay awake. You just made it a lot more interesting," she smiled, "But how come you know so much about the Goblin Rebellions?"

As if on cue, every Hufflepuff grew silent, awaiting his answer.

"There are two people in my life who are as close to me as brothers. One of them is a non-magical human, the other is a goblin." He had younger 'siblings,' but brothers were comrades, partners in crime, and into that category he only counted Char and Kertak. Alex might be his 'partner in crime,' but they weren't close enough emotionally to be calling each other brother and sister.

His words were met rather differently...

Susan looked intrigued, Hannah and Justin rather neutral, Ernie looked astonished, while Eloise a bit in awe.

Sally-Anne looked horrified, "It is generally known that goblins don't associate with wizards," 'Really?' he thought sarcastically, 'And how do you explain Professor Flitwick?' "What have they done when they found out you were a wizard?"

Harry chuckled, "It was Kertak telling me that I was a wand-carrier, Sally-Anne."

At his sentence, she took a step back, her face still displaying terror, "So, you're one of them. You hate the Wizarding World."

It was said with so much conviction Harry couldn't hide his astonishment, "Why would I? I haven't been in the Wizarding World long enough to judge it."

She didn't say anything, ignored him, actually, as she walked past him. Harry's eyes furrowed for a moment.

"Guess her parents aren't so fond of the goblins," Hannah mused.

They went for lunch early, thereby catching up with Sally-Anne, who refused to exchange a word with the emerald-eyed boy. Arriving at the Great Hall, Harry was surprised to see his new friends from Slytherin already sitting there. The Fletchlings were the only people currently occupying the Great Hall save for a small group of upper years at the Ravenclaw table.

He searched Blaise's gaze who was the only person sitting in the position to see him. The boy smiled when he noticed him and gestured him to come over. Wordlessly, Harry asked if his peers were allowed to join them.

Permission was given, and he gestured them to follow him. Introductions were made quickly.

"I've heard of the Zabinis and the Bulstrodes," Ernie spoke up, "The two of you are cousins, aren't you? All my cousins already finished their education at Hogwarts, but we don't live as close anyway. You live on the same estate, right?"

Blaise nodded looking a tad bit uncomfortable, "Yes. The mansions stand right next to each other," he glanced at Harry, "We... I mean, our families..."

"Are wealthy?" Harry asked with his eyebrows raised, "It would be hypocritical of me to dislike you simply because you have money. First, because that's as much of a prejudice as the ones I had to deal with every time an Other found out I was an orphan and second, because..." It was still strange to think that... "It seems as if I have money as well."

As he spoke, he was met by three two questions uttered at the same time by three people different people.

Blaise and Millicent asked what Others were.

Ernie on the other hand asked, "How come... Oh, you're that Potter. You didn't say so. I didn't know there was an heir."

Harry merely looked at Ernie with his eyebrows raised, "Because I never knew them. They died before I was old enough to know them."

He didn't want to talk about his parents, not while Ernie was talking of heirs and lineage, which told him absolutely nothing. Theo seemed to sense his feelings before the others caught up on it, and asked the same question as Blaise had.

"Did I say that?" Harry asked feeling his cheeks flush a bit. It was a word he usually used solely around orphans... In school, he'd either been taunted or ignored; he'd never really talked to an Other before coming to Hogwarts. He'd have to adapt his vocabulary. On the other hand, he'd always refrained from talking Gutter Talk, for several reasons. That didn't mean he had the intention of denying

where he came from, though, "Others are what we use to call people different from us, that is to say people growing up with parents, or any adult that does not count as caretaker or teacher."

"So," Blaise said, "That's all of us?"

"Yeah... Well, not really. Your parents aren't here, are they? So, you don't count as an Other, at least for the moment... It's complicated."

"I think I get it. Is it strange? It must have been a bit of a culture shock to come here," Justin asked. It was odd that this came from a kid of a non-magical family... Well, maybe not so strange after all.

Harry shrugged a bit uncomfortably. It was strange being able to focus on your own education all of a sudden, but to live with a bunch of children your age was a thing he'd done his entire life. He missed the presence of little ones, and his family in general, especially Char, but really... "I learned that with the Others it's the same as with orphans. There are people you like and those you... don't. As long as you can avoid them, it's no problem."

It had been hard at first when they arrived at St Mary's.

Hell had been terrible, but amongst the peers had been a rather simple concept: stick together or he'll crush you.

And they had stuck together, they'd been a community, and every new person arriving had been taken care of, which had been a necessity because otherwise, the poor kids would have broke.

Arriving at St Mary's had been difficult at first because they came from different backgrounds with different experiences and, perhaps the most important thing, the inhabitants were a family. Newcomers had it tough, but there had been no space at all. Grey, for example, had suffered from attacks of anxiety every once in a while, moments where he completely 'lost it.' He wasn't a violent kid, though, and whenever it came, he'd just leave the group and hit his fist against a wall, or whatever was necessary to release the stress. At St Mary's, there weren't many places to spend alone for an extended period of time.

He'd never forget the day Kai and Char had gotten into a fist fight three days after their arrival. Kai had misinterpreted Char's intention to be alone and it had ended... badly.

Harry had broken off the fight before it got deadly, but it did end with blue eyes. Had he arrived only a few minutes later... He suppressed a shudder.

Char and Kai got along well enough over the past few months, but they'd never be brothers the way Char and Harry were. There was mutual respect, as Kai respected Harry, but they weren't that close.

"There are rules of conduct I grew up with and they aren't always in a straight line with the rules at this school," and he wasn't only talking about the magic part, "But I'm a quick study when it comes to rules." He'd learned three different sets of rules, what difference did a fourth set make?

"Give me a rule, one of yours, I mean, I'm curious," Hannah chimed in.

Which ones?

The street rules? The rules from St Mary's? Or the rules of Hell?

"If we come across a fitting situation, I'll fill you in," he decided to say.

"No, wait," the ever-attentive Ernie spoke up, "There's one you said to Cedric... Be invisible, don't be seen... Something like that. What did you mean by it, anyway?"

Street rules. Okay.

"You want to be unseen, become invisible... Or stay out of the bloody light.' Yeah, it's a good rule if you want to learn the art of stealth. I saw him that day at King's Cross, he followed me, what I didn't know, was that he wanted to help me. I just knew someone was on my tail. Then, the rule applied. That's all. It's easy to disappear in a crowd," he told them neutrally, but he wanted them to change the subject. He had no wish to discuss his past.

Ernie was completely unaware of it, "So, you can make yourself invisible?"

"Not in a magical sense," he was just good at sticking to the shadows, "Just... Avoid people's gazes."

"You definitely had no wish of staying invisible in neither Potions nor History of magic," Sally-Anne spoke up. Her face was stern and Harry saw immediately that she was an Other, the kind he really wanted to avoid.

Like Draco Malfoy and Laci Longbottom.

"What happened?"

A brief summary was given by Susan, who, to Harry's gratitude, was insistent that in Potions he hadn't been looking for anything.

Snape had started questioning him.

"Then why did he make fun of him?" Sally-Anne shot back. Harry sighed in frustration.

"I didn't make fun of him..."

"Really?" she definitely didn't believe him, Harry set his jaw, "Then why imitating him?"

"It was a bloody compliment," he blurted out, "Do you know how rare it is to find a person with the ability to speak the way Professor Snape does? He's a born storyteller! Compared to him I'm a bad rip-off. He's better than..." He wouldn't say Sully's name. He wouldn't, "Most. He's talking in a way I've no problem listening to, registering everything. So, yes, it was a compliment when I repeated what he said the way he said it. Word by word.., To tell a story is not only to say a bunch of words, it's to feel. Have you heard a word he said? At the beginning? His speech? 'You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making. As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses...' Again he spoke it the way their teacher had. His peers' mouths stood open. Theo and Blaise remained composed, but they looked astonished, "I don't know how long he's

been teaching. But if you can still talk of your subject with such passion after several years, you truly love it. Professor Flitwick, McGonagall and Sprout seem to love their topic just as well, but he was able to voice it. You don't see that very often. Unfortunately, he misinterpreted my words for disrespect and I'm facing detention for it. I'll survive."

He didn't know what would happen this evening, but he'd sworn himself half a year ago never to be hurt by a male adult again.

Sullivan he'd accepted in order to protect his friends... On the other hand, Snape was Millicent's, Blaise's and Theo's Head of House...

No, never again! He'd seen Headmaster Dumbledore. He wasn't the kind of man to tolerate violence towards students. He was almost entirely certain of it.

"Wow," Blaise murmured, "I mean, yeah, I noticed he knew how to make you listen, but I didn't know it was possible to recite him the way you just did. You've got to explain this to him... That you didn't mean to insult him."

"Let me first survive that detention," Harry joked... Or at least, the others would think he was only joking. He was deadly serious with the survival part, "I'm afraid he'd think I'd be making excuses if I'm telling that before serving actual detention."

Millicent grinned, "Good thinking."

They continued talking about the lessons they'd had this week, and the Slytherins were all impressed by Harry's protest concerning Professor Binns.

"You'll know more about this than we do," Millicent stated thoughtfully, "Wizarding Society avoids goblins except for financial matters."

"Which is sad, I think it would be beneficial for both sides if they did..."

"They'!" Sally-Anne exclaimed standing up, "You see? You're one of them."

"Now you're making yourself ridiculous," Harry retorted very seriously and with narrowed eyes. He didn't bear hysterics well. In fact, he didn't bear it at all, "I grew up in the non-magical part of London, Sally-Anne, I apologize if not counting myself as a part of Wizarding Society somehow offends you, but I've been here for a week... I like it here, I love the castle and I've met some really good people, but that doesn't mean I'll forget where I'm from and who taught me everything I know. Goblins are like humans in many ways, they are certainly as smart, smarter than the general human population actually. If this scares you, well... Let's have truce, okay?"

He was tired, on edge for he didn't know what was awaiting him tonight and still angry due to Binns... He didn't want a fight above all else.

Sally-Anne only huffed, stood up and left with her head held high. Ernie, who got along well with her, caught Harry's gaze looking a bit torn.

"Go," Harry answered the unspoken question seriously, "She's upset and I'm not. Go on, it's fine. I won't hold it against you."

Justin and Ernie both stood up excusing themselves, but Hannah, Susan and Eloise didn't think of leaving.

"What's the matter with her?" Eloise asked irritably. It was the first time, Harry had heard her irritated.

"If you're taught intolerance at home, you acquire it without question. Neighbours telling their kids not to play with us because we're 'dirty' or 'uncivilized,' and they won't talk to us anymore unless to insult us. I grew up with types like Sally-Anne, it's not their fault. That doesn't mean I like it," Harry explained calmly.

"She's an Other," Theo, as always, got to the bottom of the problem with a short sentence and Harry could only nod in the affirmative.

"What are you planning for this afternoon? I heard all Firsties have Friday afternoon off," Blaise changed the subject smoothly.

"Finishing my homework, read the things for next week, explore the castle a little more, then get prepared for detention, why?" Harry offered his plans. He really wanted to get better with his writing skills.

"Perfect," Millicent chimed in, "Our plans are similar. How about doing that outside this afternoon? The castle is far in the North, so we won't be able to study outside for quite a while in winter."

Harry loved the idea, so did everybody else. He was a bit surprised to see that everybody had their things packed already, which was why he excused himself to get his things from his dorm. Arriving there, he noticed with astonishment that, apart from Potions and History of Magic (Binns had given them quite a bit of homework, mostly due to his irritation) he'd finished everything the teachers had told him to.

It was so strange to have so much time at hand. However, he loved it. It gave him time to get to the root of question, think just a little bit more than he usually had time.

He was still getting up at five in the morning, but he didn't mind. He liked the quiet mornings, just like he had at St Mary's. The house-elves seemed to have gotten used to him, Trinky was a really funny person to talk to. He learned quite a bit from the kitchen staff in general.

A house-elf's magic was bound to their home unless they worked in their master's name. The power of the elves was remarkable, but they were using it solely for the well-being of their house and master. Once, there had been a very strict hierarchy, which still partially existed at places with many house-elves such as Hogwarts, but all in all it had stopped to exist, when they'd been enslaved.

The elves themselves said so. They were enslaved. Harry's blood ran cold whenever he heard the expression.

Slave.

Wand-carriers had no right to enslave anybody! He agreed with the goblins whole-heartedly on this.

'Yeah, maybe I am one of them after all,' Harry thought amused as he turned around a corner. At the end of the corridor, there were three students.

Between fifteen and seventeen, if Harry read their age correctly. Something about the way they stood there caused his instincts to kick in. He wouldn't be lowering his guard while passing them.

It didn't go as far.

As he approached them, he felt two more people coming up from another corridor nearby. Out of the corner of his eyes, he thought them to be about the other students' age.

Great. They'd just cut off his escape route.

"May I help you?" he asked quietly, but with his voice steady. He wasn't scared. Nevertheless, he knew the wand in his pocket wouldn't be of use. He didn't know enough about wand-magic to defend himself against upper years.

Definitely not up against so many.

"Oh yes," undoubtedly the leader of the group replied casually, "You see, we were told you don't take the separation of the houses too seriously. At first, we thought: well, it's just a little first year Badger... Why do anything, he'll learn quickly enough not to enter serpent's lair, but then you just can't get a grip, can you, having Lions associates with Snakes... That's not good!"

"Could you please explain yourself a little better? The animal references don't work," Harry retorted calmly, his voice laced with sarcasm. He was ready for both, fight or flight.

Three boys cornered him. He'd seen them all at the Slytherin table, the leader's name he didn't know for sure, though.

Filt, Fint, or something similar.

"Let's get this clear then. You stop talking to our Fletchlins, or you face the consequences."

"Which are...?" he still sounded calm, but his body was tense.

"Well, first of all, we'll make your life hell..."

Wrong choice of words.

Emerald started to blaze like fire, but they seemed icy.

He wouldn't hurt them. It was just a saying, a mere saying. They didn't mean it, not like this...

"... And of course, our Fletchlings will have to face the consequences of betraying their ow..." His incomplete sentence was interrupted by a gasp. Quicker than any of the older boys could watch, Harry had moved past them and pushed. Not too hard, but enough to let 'Flick,' or whatever the hell his name was, slam against the wall.

Harry stood there, all calm, but a form of tranquillity nobody with common sense ever wanted to witness.

Only few at St Mary's knew this side of Harry, Char being one of them.

He hated hurting people, true, but those who tried hurting his friends...

Lacius and Malfoy might have been able to irk him.

The older student in front of him had managed to piss him off.

It wasn't much, really, just a different way of describing the same sentiment. But it made a vast difference to Harry. He'd end this quarrel here, permanently.

A threat for a threat.

If he didn't want to hurt the boy in front of him, he'd have to make it worthwhile. He noticed the other four teenagers lifting their wands, their leader seemed shell-shocked.

Good.

The walls behind him seemed to whisper...

The carpet on the wall was another secret pathway, and it was only five feet away. Sharply, Harry moved forward shoving the Slytherin sideways, who stumbled and fell through the carpet.

"Furunculus!" one of the other teenagers cried, but Harry had already followed their leader.

As he stepped through, he felt the walls behind him become solid again. Hogwarts seemed to have taken his side. They would not be interrupted. They'd landed in a small room, no bigger than Harry's chamber at St Mary's.

'Filt' already had his wand at the ready when Harry turned to face him, pointing it at the younger boy's throat. He looked furious.

"Don't move," he hissed coldly, his wand-hand was remarkably calm, especially when Harry noticed the dilated pupils.

It didn't matter.

He was too close for his own good, but too far away to inhibit Harry's moves. Quicker than 'Falk' was able to react, he shifted to the left and behind 'Fit,' hitting his back and the elbow with force. When the older teenager stumbled forward, Harry grabbed the wand-wrist and the other boy slammed down.

When 'Fint' looked up again, Harry was holding his wand, a thunderstorm raging in dark emerald.

"Look, kid," 'Fick's' voice quivered lightly for the first time, "You don't really know how to work with the wand. Just give it to me and we can talk in a civilized manner."

Harry chuckled coldly, "As civilized as you did by cornering a First Year with four of your friends? I don't think so. Let me tell you something, you want to threat someone, don't do it halfway."

The sixteen-year-old was pushed against a wall, the wand at his throat like a knife. Wide-eyed, the Slytherin looked down before a smirk formed on his lips and he sighed in relief.

Amused, the teenager started laughing, "See? You don't know..." Again, he spoke no further for he could suddenly feel steel where once had been wood.

"I do," Harry whispered quietly, the knife firmly in his right hand, "Touch them, do them any harm, and you will respond to me. Getting detention or losing house-points will be the least of your worries then."

"What..." he gulped, "What will you..."

"Oh, where's the fun in telling?" Harry's voice was as steely as the blade he was holding, "I simply wouldn't try if I were you."

He hated this. He hated it so much! But he was ready to go over any lengths protecting his friends; Filt better knew this.

He wasn't violent, he preferred verbally outsmarting his adversaries. If at all possible, he avoided hurting them.

However, he was capable of doing it if his friends' well being was at stake. That was why those willing to hurt them had to know that they weren't dealing with a mere kid facing him.

He still regretted doing it.

"Have I made myself clear? Leave me and my friends alone." With yet another gulp, 'Fit' nodded.

The older boy's words had gone beyond demands; it had been a threat.

A threat for a threat. The principle was simple.

It still gave him chills.

Wordlessly, he moved away from the teenager and turned towards the wall. With a scream, the Slytherin launched forward. Harry, having anticipated this, moved aside and let him run right through the carpet. The large boy collided with his friends causing them all to stumble.

Shakily, Flint regained balance. Steven Bole gripped his elbows to steady him.

"What, in Merlin's name, just happened, Flint?" he asked sharply, while Terence Higgs immediately tore the carpet aside, but the walls were solid again. He cursed loudly.

"He's still in there. Let's wait," Bole spoke coldly, but was worried immediately when he saw Flint's face lose all colour. "Marcus?"

"He went past us," he whispered quietly.

"How do you know that for sure?" Steven asked warily. What happened in there?

The response was Flint lifting his wand with slightly trembling fingers.

"Your wand... And?" Terence chimed in.

"They're off limits. Bulstrode, Zabini, Nott... They're off limits," he said decidedly, "In fact, all of Potter's friends are. The contrary actually, you see them in trouble, you help them."

Slightly puzzled, the four Slytherins nodded. As if they would do anything to the Fletchlings in the first place! Their Head would skin them alive if they tried. The second part was much more interesting, though. Not touching the Gryffindors sitting at their table?

Their curiosity was peaked.

How, in the name of Sprenger and Institoris, had Harry managed to scare the Captain of Slytherin's Quidditch team?

"Is he dangerous?" Kyle, Flint's closest friend, asked.

"Not as long as we leave his friends alone, he's not," was Flint's reply.

Ten corridors away, Harry finally stopped running. Slowly, he leaned against a wall and slid to the ground, closing his eyes while trying to steady his breath.

'You have the power to...'

No! Sullivan was wrong! He was not like that, he wasn't!

He was hugging himself, desperately wishing for Kertak or Char to be there, the only two people capable of consoling him (for they were the only ones allowing him to let go off his responsibilities every once in a while. Around them, he could be weak. He didn't have to be the strong one. In Char's case, at least not always).

He knew that of all the things he could have done or that could have happened, he'd chosen the alternative promising the least violence and future problems, but that didn't keep him from feeling miserable. He missed his friends so dearly in that moment; it was physically painful.

'They threat, you threat. They fight, you fight.'

Sully's rule for a five-year-old boy who was having a hard time on the streets.

He'd taken the rule very seriously, and it had served him well. He'd adapted it a bit over the years.

'Only hurt if you don't have another choice. If you have to, keep the damage at a minimum.'

He'd done nothing wrong.

Finally, he was breathing calmly again. With a sigh he laid his head against the cold walls. Warmth spread through his body and he had to smile a little.

Maybe his brothers weren't here, but the castle was doing a good job making him feel better.

He got up, picked up his bag, and walked back to the Great Hall, looking forward to spending the afternoon with his newfound friends.

A/N: Thank you so much! I received so many reviews for the last chapter (TWENTY-ONE), I feel flattered! Thank you.

I'll have responded the reviews to this chapter by Wednesday, and I apologize for not having responded much for the last chapter...I hereby thank you all once more instead. I'm in the middle of my exams which was why I didn't have much time.

Questions I'll answer personally by PM, but plot-wise I won't give away much.

Special thanks as always to MissGoalie75 for being my patient Beta. You're a wonderful beta and an excellent writer.

So, it's morning. As always I'm hardly coherent... One last thing: Please, review and I hope you've enjoyed the new chapter!

Next part is going to be detention.

Chapter 9, Part Two: Of Loyalty, Threats and Detention

'Those blasted eyes,' Severus Snape thought, feeling an odd mixture of despair and bitter anger.

He was masochistic. He had to be. He was unable to explain any other way how else he was ready to spend additional time with that boy.

Her eyes in his face!

It was like being sucker-punched whenever looking into that child's face. Oh, how much he'd wished the boy to be a carbon-copy of his father so he could hate him with no boundaries, but the boy had been reasonably respectful towards him. He'd answered the questions with a mixture of knowledge and intelligence, not unlike Lily would have.

Yes, the boy had been respectful until he had suddenly decided to impersonate him. He still couldn't fathom what had happened.

The Hufflepuff had been writing during his speech and the Potions Master had been absolutely sure that he wasn't listening. However, at his question, the eleven-year-old had answered correctly but insolently as well.

It didn't make sense. Nothing made sense when it came to that boy...

"Severus," the headmaster greeted him kindly, "Thank you very much for coming. There was a matter I wanted to discuss with you."

The tall, young man returned the greeting awaiting patiently the headmaster's words.

"It concerns the upcoming school year and a student I would like to talk to you about," the old wizard began.

"I've already told you that I'll make sure your precious Boy Who Lived won't get into any trouble," Snape managed to keep his annoyance at bay.

He wasn't looking forward to seeing the symbol of the Wizarding World celebrating his life, while she had died, and not even a year later, her son as well, whom she most likely had died for...

Her son who'd died in a meaningless Muggle gas explosion.

Petunia (whom he'd last spoken to the summer after that fateful day at the lake and whom he'd last seen at their graduation) and her little boy, whom he'd never met, had died that day, too.

There was nothing crueller than life's irony... That the blasted Muggle she'd married would be thrown out of the very house that would claim Petunia's life.

When he'd heard of Vernon Dursley's abusive ways, he was ready to stand in line for torturing him. Had one of the raids ever caused him to face that brutish Muggle, he'd have killed him.

The only murder he wouldn't regret these days.

"This isn't about Laci, Severus..." the Potions professor couldn't remember the last time he'd heard his friend and mentor hesitate, "It's Harry."

The name... He only knew one Harry, and that Harry had died nine years ago.

Slowly, Snape started to shake his head, "No, it cannot... Albus?"

"Harry Potter survived the gas explosion, Severus. Lily's son lives."

Lily's son. Potter's son... Harry Potter.

One of Dumbledore's various devices on his desk exploded.

"What?" the whisper was a hiss, but his voice would have broken had he spoken any louder. Slowly, he sat down into the chair he usually made no use of, "That's not... What happened?"

It was rare to see this particular wizard losing his composure like this.

And so he had learned the details of Harry Potter's survival and what little Albus knew of the child's past.

Lily's son growing up in an orphanage? It was unheard of.

Three different orphanages at least and one of them had been an especially hideous place.

The headmaster had carefully avoided naming its caretaker or what rumours surrounded the place, undoubtedly because he'd been afraid that Snape might do something less than pleasant to the man who'd owned that particular orphanage.

Minerva hadn't shown any such restraint.

A week after the headmaster's revelation, he'd sat together with Lily's old Head of House who'd (apparently) been one of her bridesmaids alongside Petunia and they'd been gathering all the information they could gain concerning that scandal occurring eight months ago.

The man's name was Michael Sullivan and he was imprisoned for life in a Muggle prison (that alone showed what kind of person he was and therefore what sort of orphanage it had been).

Currently, the two of them were planning on initiating a transfer that would have this sorry excuse of a human being rot in Azkaban for having hurt a wizard child.

And a loathsome creature Sullivan was.

Bellatrix Lestrange might learn something in the art of torture from that Muggle. Oh, certainly, he had by no means the Cruciatus Curse at his disposal, but he'd been playing terrible mind games on the children he'd sworn to nurse and protect.

Beatings, starvation, the use of fire and ice as disciplinary or rather torture methods, strong neglect, practically no sanitary care, using the orphans as house-elves, forcing them to steal money on the streets if they wanted to eat at all...

On and on went the list.

The fact he seemed to have refrained from any sexual offence was a very small comfort. Had there been the slightest hint of that as well,

Minerva would have killed him and Snape would have gladly assisted.

Should either of them ever meet the creature in person, it would not get out of it alive.

Thank Merlin, the boy couldn't have been there for longer than a year!

Every child, Muggle law enforcement and fire-fighters had found the night the building had burned to the ground, had been examined and all those children residing there for more than a year had been in need of intensive psychological care. Fifteen children were still in the closed wing of a specialized hospital for psychiatric care. Eight of them had completely shut down emotionally, unresponsive to their environment.

The other children, twenty-one of them, had been placed into other orphanages after spending one or two weeks in either a Muggle hospital or day-nursery under strict observation until they found places for them to stay permanently. Lily's son was one of those.

The place hadn't always been the way the day it burned.

Sullivan had taken over the orphanage on Halloween ten years ago ('Oh, the irony!') from an elderly couple, who seemed to have been doing a decent job before, but had failed completely at their choice of successor... Maybe, it hadn't been too bad at first, but in the course of five years, Michael Sullivan had created 'Hell' as every orphan currently living in London called the place.

That was all he knew. Public records hadn't even given as much information, but he had means of receiving necessary facts.

And still, Harry Potter's connection to that place was a mystery. He'd been there, but nobody seemed to know for how long. Given the boy's social skills and rather polite demeanour, it couldn't have been for long.

Anyway, a place like this left its mark. He was sure of it.

Before he could dwell on it any further, he heard a knock at the door.

"Enter," he said quietly. The door was opened slowly and a small boy entered.

Another jab seared through his heart when he looked straight into uncovered emerald. Why couldn't he have kept those blasted glasses Albus had told him about?

"Good evening, Professor," the boy's voice was calm, but it seemed forced. Quickly, he surveyed the child and was taken aback by the sight.

Every muscle seemed tense, ready to either fight or flight.

The place definitely left its mark.

He'd seen a picture and read a description of Sullivan's looks. They didn't look alike, but they were tall, lean and male adults.

Well, he wouldn't give the child a reason to fear yet another person that was supposed to protect him.

Snape had by no means any intention of getting close to Potter's son, even as a teacher. That boy could go to others if he needed a confidante. Harry Potter wasn't a student of his House, so he had no further obligation to him than securing his safety and teaching him Potions.

Snape wanted the boy to know he was strict and unyielding, that he tolerated neither insolence nor laziness, but there was no need to terrify him.

"You may leave the door open, Mr Potter," he stated calmly and earned a sharp look in response. Tension didn't leave the boy, but he didn't look as if he'd just been sent to slaughter either.

When their eyes met, the Potions Master had a sudden flash of his own father forcing him into a corner and the memory shocked him so profoundly, he took a step back. Emerald widened in what seemed, to his horror, understanding. The boy's gaze unsettled the usually calm wizard causing him to clear his mind as a form of active Occlumency.

Had this action confused the child in front of him, Snape would have started to worry for such a thing meant that Lily's eleven-year-old son was capable of Legilimency. Therefore, he was profoundly relieved to see his pupil's expression didn't change.

Harry Potter was perceptive, though. The penetrating gaze told him this. However, it took more than a child's searching look to disconcert Severus Snape. The unexpected memory had taken him aback, not the boy.

"My detentions either contain the writing of lines, the cleaning of cauldrons or the classroom or the preparation of particularly unpleasant ingredients." He didn't explain the content of his detentions to every child earning punishment.

Merlin knew, he hadn't explained it to the Weasley twins. They'd managed to notice it all by themselves within their first two months at Hogwarts.

However, he did explain matters to the members of his House and otherwise all those whom he expected to have had a harsh childhood. Some Hufflepuffs, maybe one or two Ravenclaws, though admittedly, those Houses hardly every received any detentions. He couldn't remember a time to have explained it to a Gryffindor.

It was the right thing to do in this case for he saw even more muscles lose some of their tension. He'd given the boy a chance to run and he'd just told him that he wouldn't have to fear physical assault, though not in those exact words.

"Given your background," which had been hurled out into class by Laci Longbottom, though the boy couldn't have been more wrong with his statement of 'never leaving the safety of his orphanage,' "I'd say lines would be best for tonight for I think that physical labour is something you're used to." The child's expression didn't falter and another rush of relief coursed through the Potions Master. He definitely hadn't stayed there for a long time.

"Please, sit down," he continued, "And write 'It is impertinent to impersonate my instructors.' I'd say a hundred times should be sufficient."

To his surprise, the boy looked as if he wanted to protest. He hadn't expected him to be defiant after having made as many allowances.

"Is there a problem, Potter?" he asked slightly irritated. Once again, he looked straight into emerald.

"It's not," the boy replied after a moment of silence. Was that street jargon for 'No, there isn't'?

"Could you repeat that, Potter?" it was so painful to think that the boy may not be able to speak properly. He'd heard him talk earlier today, but there was a chance he'd just tried to hide where he was from and now that the 'secret' was out in the open, he had no reason to hold back.

"It's not impertinent, sir."

Now that he had not expected.

"Explain yourself!" he replied sharply, though not cruelly. The boy didn't even flinch.

"I didn't mean to insult you, sir, and the lines you want me to write are a lie in my eyes. I don't lie unless I can't help it. I'm willing to write whatever you ask me to and if it is the warning at Gringotts' door a hundred times, but it has to be true," the reply was calm, but the boy seemed to measure the distance between himself and the door as if calculating just how fast he could run away.

His trust in adult authority was not very high, if existent in the first place.

"So, are you trying to tell me that you don't think it an impertinence to play parrot?"

His words earned another sharp, calculating look.

"The written word may rest without motion.

Ever lasting word.

The spoken word is mere breath.

Over the moment it is spoken. Never to be heard again.

Imagine preserving what is heard and you shall make the present eternity, while what is written captures the past.'

Goblins have been having quarrels with the Wizarding World for hundreds of years, sir. There was espionage on both sides, and Goblin Society likes to keep their secrets hidden, but whatever is written down, is not safe. Every code can be broken. Like this, they started the tradition of verbally passing the knowledge they don't want anyone else to know. The centaurs have a rather similar tradition, as have house-elves and the merpeople, the latter for obvious reasons since books have the tendency to get wet when they fall into water. 'Playing parrot' as you said is therefore important to many peoples in the magical world for otherwise they lose quite a bit of knowledge. I didn't mean to insult you and I apologize if you interpreted my actions as such. You've spoken in the ways of a storyteller and a storyteller's greatest warrant is when one speaks their words in exactly the same manner as they've told the tale themselves."

The child could definitely talk. He'd surprised Snape when he'd overheard his talk with Filius Flitwick. Now however, he'd managed to stun him.

Though his last sentence had been uttered in the way of someone stating facts heard a hundred times before, the sheer eloquence of the eleven-year-old stunned him.

"I see." It was all he could say without giving away his surprise.

Suddenly, a smile adorned the young face and it shocked him more than any other action before.

He was their son. For the first time, he could truly see it.

James Potter's face with the smile he only wore around his closest friends at the same time as those eyes, in form and shape so much alike Lily's... It was the perfect combination to express amusement and happiness.

To admit such a thing nearly cut his heart out.

Horrible irony was that the boy's life was everything but a laughing matter.

"I apologize, sir," the smile had faded slightly but lost hardly anything of its power, "I tend to explain matters important to me in a rather long-winded manner. What I'm trying to say is that I'm sorry for having offended you by imitating you. I will refrain from doing so in the future."

For the first time in ten years of teaching, he was confronted with the situation of a student actually apologizing and justifying the action that had caused them to deserve detention (he had to admit his action had been rash for he had not seen Harry but James Potter impersonating him).

"Why did you not explain this during class?" he asked therefore gaining time to sort his thoughts.

"You seemed angry, I didn't want to irate you any further by challenging your authority in our very first class," was the reply and Snape officially declared this conversation to be out of his comfort zone.

He could deal with idiocy, manipulative behaviour, deception and all other kinds of unpleasantness presented by adults and students. He wasn't used to apologies and considerate actions, at least not directed at him. There was no ingenuity either, he was sure of it without having to illegally peak into a child's mind.

Harry Potter was definitely unlike anything he had expected.

"Had you been able to choose what to do tonight, Mr Potter. What would you have done?"

He was relieved to have unsettled the boy with the question. At least, he wasn't the only person confronted with constant surprises.

"I'd have spent a little more time with my friends and would practise my writing for another hour..." His voice faded the moment he heard what he'd just said.

It took quite a bit of self-control not to show his amusement, "I suggest you do just that, Mr Potter. I'll be at my desk correcting this

semester's first essays." Thus said, he walked to the dark wood and sat down.

After a moment's hesitation, the boy did as he was told. Silence followed, only the familiar scratching of a quill touching parchment filled the room. Focused on his essays, he didn't notice much, but when he looked up after a while, he noticed the first years' (Hufflepuff! Who'd have thought Lily's and James' son to become a Hufflepuff?) writing position.

Mr Potter's face practically hit parchment, his hand gripped the quill as if he wanted to squash the life of the poor, already dead writing device, the tip of his tongue stuck out and his eyebrows were furrowed as if it caused him physical pain to bring his words to paper.

It was painful just to look at it. Mainly, because he used to have the same habit (though admittedly, his hand hadn't looked quite as forced) and he still had to school himself sometimes when engrossed into an important letter or a particularly fascinating piece of writing.

For a moment, he watched the boy's painful struggles before he stated dryly, "I wonder what this pitiful quill did to you to deserve such ire."

The statement caused Lily's son to snap out of his concentration and he looked up. Emerald eyes met black ones before Harry lowered his head in obvious shame. "That poor thing is not responsible for having an unpractised owner."

Thankfully, the boy didn't look up and therefore unable to watch his Potions professor smirk in amusement. Even in moments of embarrassment, the child had his wits together.

He stood up and had immediate attention. It saddened him to note that Lily's son had so little faith in adults he wouldn't let them out of sight.

Slowly, he swept around his desk and approached the eleven-year-old. Either out of habit or even reflex, the boy straightened up and pushed his chair back. The latter was done almost imperceptibly and wouldn't have caught a lot of people's attention. It would allow him to get up within the blink of an eye, though.

He took a chair nearby, sat down and lifted the quill he'd taken along.

"Like this," he stated briskly demonstrating him how to properly hold a quill, "There is no need to write with your nose, Mr Potter. Try to sit more comfortably. Writing isn't supposed to hurt, try to keep that in mind and practise every day. When your hand cramps, stop, wait until it's over and begin again. It won't help you to put yourself past a certain point of pain. Once it hurts, it won't stop as long as you're writing." Without saying another word, he demonstrated again, so the boy could copy it.

Widened emerald stared at him as the hand followed his help. He wasn't quite as capable at imitating movements as well as voices and Snape had the urge to manually correct the child. However, the first year was tense enough already by his sheer presence, there was no need to make things worse.

Verbally, he instructed him until he was holding the quill properly. It seemed a lot more relaxed now. Jerkily, he nodded and walked back to his desk.

Without saying a word, he focused back on his essays. A minute later, he heard the boy follow his actions. A soft exclamation of pleasant surprise was uttered before falling silent again.

Half an hour later, he checked on the boy's writing who'd paused at some point before starting again. The hand-writing was easy enough to read, but it looked as if written by a much younger child.

"I haven't written much in my life," the Hufflepuff stated quietly, avoiding his teacher's gaze.

'Orphanages don't tend to support the art of writing. The streets even less. Have you been there, Mr Potter? Or were you handed from place to place without ever having found a real home?' he thought feeling sad on the Lily's son's behalf.

"Given your eloquence I don't doubt you'll catch up," Snape replied instead, "As long as you keep practising."

"Thank you, sir," emerald attacked him again. 'Those blasted eyes!' "For listening and for showing me how to hold a quill." Eyes flickered

over to the opened classroom door and Snape knew that the thing he was most grateful for had not been spoken aloud.

He didn't like responding to gratitude. All he did was nod briskly.

The orphan seemed to understand anyhow.

"I think it's time for you to go back to your Common Room since a certain pathway has decided to be a bit more stubborn this year than before." He didn't know why he said this. Stating he knew why they'd almost been late this morning... It was unlikely for an eleven-year-old to get the hint in the first place.

What he received was another smile.

The unsettling combination of James Potter and Lily Evans, but for the life of it he couldn't despise the child for it.

It would be cruel to punish a kid for having inherited his parents' redeeming qualities (James Potter had those too, not a lot of them, but he did have them).

"Have a good evening, sir," a sudden voice shook him out of his reveries. How the boy had managed to pack up so silently was already surprising. How he'd managed to walk past him with his bag shouldered without being noticed by him was a complete mystery.

"The same to you, Mr Potter."

For the first time since meeting James Potter on the Hogwarts train a little less than twenty years ago, the name Potter had no derisive edge to it.

A/N: I apologize for the delay. First there were my exams, then the typical post-exam feeling which isn't helping your muse at all and then there were technological problems thrown in on top. At this point, I thank MissGoalie75 for beta-ing this chapter twice. You're great :)

THIRTY reviews? I've never, ever since I started writing several years ago, received thirty reviews for a single chapter. For that I

thank you whole-heartedly. I think to most I've responded personally and to everybody else: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Next chapter should be posted a bit sooner since I'm already writing on it ;-)

Next Chapter: Settle In, Settle Down

Chapter 10, Part One: Settle In, Settle down

Well. That had been... interesting.

Harry closed the door leading into the Potions classroom and was walking across the corridor leading towards the Great Hall.

He thought he knew what type of person Severus Snape was, and to his relief, his primary assumptions were correct. However, there was a lot more to the Potions Master than he'd originally thought.

Oh, he was strict and severe, not allowing the slightest slip in his class. A life-saving requirement in the kind of subject he taught. On the other hand, he had a tendency to be overly harsh, even insulting, towards people he held a certain dislike for, no matter their age, and above all in the face of supposed impertinence or mockery.

The Potions Master demanded respect, though he gave little in return. Harry had thought so when he first saw him. It was just the type of person he was...

Next to strictness and harshness without cruelty, there was complete faith in their abilities.

All this, he had expected.

He'd failed to notice something much more important.

Two things, actually.

First of all, behind the cold mask (and a mask it was, no matter how firmly put on the teacher's face) there was understanding. The type of understanding that only existed when you were there yourself. He'd realized it the moment he was told to leave the door open. Harry had known it because, even if the headmaster had done research after receiving Sister Augustine's information and for whatever reason conveyed it to Snape, only few people knew what to do when faced with a past like Harry's.

Those who'd had a similar one.

Snape wasn't a street kid, Harry would have seen that the moment he'd first laid eyes on him. He wasn't an orphan either for similar reasons.

That only left...

Oh no!

He hated that.

He whole-heartedly despised those who hurt the children they were supposed to take care of. For the first time in many years, Harry felt outright sympathy towards a grown-up.

It wasn't the kind of sympathy Others felt for orphans. It was mixed with understanding and anger directed at the person who'd committed the crime.

Then there was the mark.

He wondered what connection an arrogant, self-righteous, rich person like Draco Malfoy's father had with a person like Severus Snape.

They bore the same mark on their forearms. Harry was sure of it. It was at the exact same spot, waving off the same faint 'cold heat,' if that made any sense. However, the feelings surrounding it couldn't differ more.

Malfoy had been proud of it, but forced to hide it. To him, it was a mark of honour despite the fact a mark always branded a person.

The Potions Master on the other hand knew he was branded. He'd taken the mark by will, but these days he despised it to the point he was disconnected from it. Harry was aware what that meant.

Severus Snape was ashamed. For having let himself be marked.

He'd seen it before. Whenever he took time to take a good look at himself.

Unconsciously, he enclosed his left wrist carrying a watch.

Unwilling to think of the past his thoughts drifted back to that tall, dark man. He wasn't nice and Harry was pretty sure that anybody daring to call him nice would be used as a potions ingredient.

His actions demanded no appreciation, the Potions Master did what he thought to be right and finished whatever he put his mind on.

A very useful character trait if he was helping you, a frightening one should you be his enemy.

Harry had learned long ago that the small gestures in life told more about a person than big words.

Instead of telling him that he understood, Snape merely told him to leave the door open. Instead of sympathizing with him for missing the opportunity to study proper handwriting, he'd simply showed him how it was done. Harry doubted the man had any idea just how helpful his instructions had been and how grateful Harry was to have received them.

Snape was still not a person he wanted to meddle with, but he could imagine him as a future ally.

Not just yet, though. For now, he was a mere teacher and an adult.

Harry could count on one hand the adults he trusted...

There was Natruk first and foremost, of course, whom he trusted and whose opinion he valued highly. The closest thing he had to an uncle.

There were the Sisters who'd been very kind to him, who worried about him as much as he did about them.

At Hogwarts, there was Hagrid of course. But the gigantic man wasn't an adult; he was a friend who just happened to be enormously big. Then, there was Professor Flitwick who'd offered his help rather bluntly. He could imagine the man to becoming a trusted adult he could turn to.

Professor Dumbledore had been very kind as well, but he was the headmaster of this school. Harry had no intention of going to that influential man before having approached everybody else.

Someone like Snape, for example. Or Professor Sprout. Or Professor McGonagall. Or Madame Pomfrey.

He wouldn't get within five feet of Professor Quirrell, though. He didn't trust him. Not only because of the pain he'd felt that first evening at Hogwarts, but because his instincts kept warning him whenever he was close. He hadn't survived for so long without listening to them.

Arriving at the Great Hall, he turned into a small corridor to the right leading straight down to the Hufflepuff basement. A shortcut he'd found this week. In front of the painting, he took a glance at his watch and noticed that there was still an hour until curfew. Instead of entering the Hufflepuff basement, he took a turn and entered the kitchen.

"Pali-maco," he greeted the kitchen crew. Trinky had introduced him to that expression this morning. 'pali' was the way to address a large group of house-elves or two and more house-elves whose names you didn't know. It was only said from one common house-elf to another which was why he received yet another scolding look from Trinky.

"You is not calling yourself house-elf, you is degrading yourself," Trinky stated with a hint of frustration in her tone. However, her eyes glimmered in happiness at the sight of her young friend.

"So, you want me to call you salà again, Trinky?" Harry smirked in amusement, especially as the house-elf turned red. He hadn't known that they could blush.

"Harry-maco, saleth," she replied hastily.

"You've been calling me that for a while now... What does it mean?"

"Saleth means 'sire' and 'child.'"

Now it was Harry's turn to blush.

Kertak had once told him an Elven story, Calà's Heart. He remembered how reluctant Kertak had been telling this particular tale for it spoke of the enslavement of house-elves by wizards,

however he'd thought it important that Harry knew. The tale was very long and it explained quite a bit about the culture of house-elves and loss thereof over the years. Harry nearly cried while Kertak had been narrating. He'd never told the story to anyone. It was the saddest and most tragic he knew.

The reason for his embarrassment was what he'd learned that evening. 'Sire' was the most respectful term for house-elves to name someone outside of the family they served. It put a person on the same level in magical power and intelligence as the house-elf's master.

In this case: Professor Dumbledore.

"Trinky, why don't we leave the salà and saeth be. What do you say?"

A kind being like Trinky shouldn't be smiling so nastily, "Really, Harry Potter, saeth?" Harry cringed slightly causing her grin to widen a little more, "But why would we do that?"

"You got your point, Trinky," the eleven-year-old winced. He wasn't outsmarted often, but he did accept defeat when it happened, "It embarrasses you and I'm sorry for having embarrassed you and I won't be doing it again. May I still stick to maco, though? Please?"

Tiny hands took his and the joyous elf was herself again, "If that is your wish, Harry Potter, sir. Of course."

Now Harry knew what Kertak had said about house-elves, 'House-elves belong to the kindest and most loyal creatures on earth, but their humour can be more wicked than a goblin's should they ever feel comfortable enough in your presence.'

It honoured him to have gained Trinky's trust.

It was evening, the kitchen crew's assignment was to clean up and wash the dishes. Harry found it fascinating to watch them work. Magic came so natural to them it didn't seem to make a difference whether they were carrying dishes or hovered them across the kitchen. The most curious thing happened when he was drying a glass in his hand... The moment he was finished, it jumped out of

his hand into a cupboard without any house-elf actually focusing on the glass. Or at least, not that he'd noticed it.

"Trinky, may I ask you a question?" he asked, still looking at the cupboard in front of him.

"Of course, Harry Potter, sir;" Trinky, who was standing only few feet away sorting silver plates, looked at him.

"How do you do that?" he asked, gesturing towards another glass finding its way into the cupboard.

"We is calling upon air and imagining ourselves very, very light," she replied as she lifted her hand and the glass spontaneously changed directions into her fingers, "Then we becomes glass."

That was a peculiar answer if he ever heard one. At least, Kertak had been right by saying their magic was influencing the four tangible elements of magic in a very direct way.

Then he startled.

'It's a kind of like imagining yourself as a cat.'

It was not the same. They called the element itself, he'd been working with the element's effects. However, his heart started to pound quickly. With a start, he remembered what Millicent had said about the use of conscious magic.

He couldn't do what these house-elves did, this casual, natural use of magic, but he could save himself, just not in a burst of magic as it seemed to be custom for a wizard child but a conscious decision to influence his surroundings magically in order to live or protect his friends. And he'd said so himself: it always came down to the four respectively five elements of magic.

Well, he knew one element that wasn't exactly a friend.

The cold water engulfed him. Darkness. So cold! Help! It hurt so much.

Harry flinched at the sudden memory. It was over. It happened more than two years ago, but the horror wouldn't let him go.

Water scared him. But what did that mean? If his hypothesis was correct in any way there would be quite a lot of spells he'd never be able to use.

A quarter.

Shakily, he took a deep breath. All happiness over finally having understood parts of his magic's nature vanished.

"Harry Potter, sir," Trinky asked worriedly, "Is you not feeling well?"

"No, Trinky, I'm fine. Thank you," Harry said after giving himself a jolt to refocus, "I've just realized that our way of performing magic is not so different." And that he might never be able to become a fully trained wizard. He'd have to see. There might be a way to work around that problem.

Trinky looked at him in deepest surprise, "What is Harry Potter saying?"

"Well, you access the elements in a straight line, I merely imagine myself to be a falling cat, my hands as rocks when I need to..."
'...Push people away who attack me. Myself to become part of the breathing flame when I have to walk through it.'

He couldn't tell her that.

'Hell's breed yeh're, Freak!!' Sullivan had said.

Harry liked Trinky. He didn't want her to fear him. Anyhow, his restraint made no difference. Her already big eyes widened.

"You is talking to earth," it was a statement, not a question, "That is why you has seen us the evening you came."

He was not talking to earth. Walls just had a way of talking to him. Showing him the way. Protecting him. It would've been rude not to do anything in return.

"I... Is that bad?" he whispered. He'd never talked to Kertak about it.

That parts of why he just knew whenever someone approached him, especially inside of his Hunting Ground, was because the city itself told or warned him... It wasn't any sort of verbal communication, just a feeling. Sometimes he saw, heard or felt something, a picture, a sentiment, sounds, mostly it was just different sensations of warmth and heat to inform or warn him.

Trinky smiled at him. It was a soft, almost motherly smile he'd sometimes seen on Sister Augustine when one of her charges was feeling unsure, "No. It is a good thing. Not often do I sees it in human magic, but it is a good thing. Do never forget to listen, Harry Potter, sir."

The last sentence was spoken as plead and advice at the same time.

Harry didn't give promises lightly. For a moment he remained silent before he said, "I cannot promise that I'll always be able to listen, but I promise to try."

It seemed to satisfy Trinky for she smiled with watery eyes in return. Only few minutes later, they were cleaning dishes again.

The Common Room was very crowded when he entered only minutes before curfew. Joyous chatter and laughter filled his ears and it overwhelmed him a bit at first. He'd gotten used to St Mary's energetic atmosphere full of life, but those were small kids running around creating havoc. These were all children his age or older. He wasn't used to that. The Great Hall never felt as crowded, it always reminded him of London's busy streets. There was always a way to squeeze through.

This was new.

Quietly, he was moving around groups talking, laughing, playing games, just having a good time in search of Susan, Eloise or Hannah. Years of practice at spotting potential generosity, threats and friendliness allowed him to recognize Susan's profile within seconds. With a smile he passed Linda and Marietta chatting with some of their classmates and approached Susan and Eloise.

"Hey," he smiled, "Where's...Sorry." Yesterday, Hannah had suggested that Harry should be wearing a bell to announce his

arrival. Seeing Eloise and Susan both flinch made the emerald-eyed boy actually consider the idea.

He remembered Kai once having made the same suggestion. As always, when St Mary's came to mind, he wondered how they were doing. His second letter (as well as Kertak's notebook) he'd sent yesterday evening. Poor Hedwig was quite a busy owl. She seemed to be having fun, though.

"Harry! Anybody ever told you that you're moving like a ghost?" Susan exclaimed grabbing her chest.

"All the time," Harry replied with a smile, "Where's Hannah?"

"She already went to bed. She's a bit tired. In case you were wondering what this gathering is about, Linda explained it to us a while ago: the first Friday into a new school year is a bit special. Curfew is the same as always, but the bedtimes are respectively an hour later," First Years had to go to bed by eleven, then, "Professor Sprout will come by to see if everything's fine, but this is organized by the Prefects."

Harry nodded before he frowned, "Was she feeling ill? She looked alright when I left."

"She didn't sleep well yesterday," Eloise explained. She'd opened up quite a bit this afternoon, after her indignant outburst because of Sally-Anne, really, "I think she misses home."

A feeling Harry could relate to all too well, "Then she shouldn't be alone."

"We were just saying the same thing, actually," Eloise smiled, "She told us it was fine, but we thought about spending the evening with her."

"Mind if I join you?"

Since neither of them objected they walked towards the door leading into that small tunnel system where their dormitories were, but as he turned left in order to follow the girls, the walls sent off a clear warning. They didn't glow, but they were very warm all of a sudden and the message was clear:

Do not pass the threshold.

Harry stopped dead, "I... don't think I'm allowed to enter the girls' dorm."

Puzzled, the Hufflepuff girls looked at him.

"I'm quite sure it's against the rules. Go ahead, go see Hannah! I'll be in the Common Room." He took another look at the walls.

"Thanks," he whispered after the girls were gone. He was quite sure that Hogwarts was unwilling to hurt its students, but a castle as old as this one might not always know what was best for its human inhabitants.

Instead of returning right back to the Common Room, he entered his own dormitory and put down the bag he'd taken along for detention. When he exited his room, he saw Hannah, Susan and Eloise exiting theirs. Immediately worried, he approached them for he saw Susan's arm laid around Hannah's shoulder in a soothing gesture.

She looked up and her mahogany eyes shone overly bright in the dimmed light. There were no words needed. Harry stepped forward and embraced her, quietly murmuring senseless words.

It was a person's tone, not their exact words that consoled another being.

Hannah took a shuddering breath whimpering a bit before her heartbeat slowed down.

"At some point this week, I missed my family so much I felt sick," Harry admitted, "Come! Let's get in there and we'll be having a good time."

She stiffened, "No, I... I don't want them to be seeing me like this."

Harry just smiled in return, "They won't. You'd be surprised how little a bunch of people see." With those words, he managed to lead her back into the Common Room. He took her hand and made his way through the crowd. Not a single person noticed them until they approached Harry's destination: a very comfortable piece of furniture

close enough to the fireplace so they could feel its warmth, but far enough into the shadows so they wouldn't be observed too closely. As Hannah sat down, Harry looked up and waved for Susan and Eloise to come.

"You just disappeared," Susan stated gesturing wildly, "How did you do that?"

"I stood out of the bloody light," he grinned as he spoke, causing Hannah to smile a bit.

"Let's trade stories," Harry suggested. The good thing about seeing new places was that there were always new stories to learn.

"I got one," Eloise said, her shyness forgotten at the sight of her homesick friend, "My mother used to tell it and it was my favourite story when I was little.

'This is the story of Groger, the Ogre. Groger was a young ogre and he was very small. Unlike his father who was strong and big with only a single eye. His mother on the other hand was very smart and her face was adorned by three eyes. Groger had two eyes, but that wasn't the only peculiar thing about him. You see, ogres, in order to be accepted by their kin as a grown, strong ogre, were inclined to kill a dragon. But Groger, he loved the tales of the dragons and his best friend was a very old dragon...' I don't recall his name, I'm afraid, sorry...' And for he didn't want to kill a dragon, he wanted to do something heroic in order to become a Gold Ogre. They only had to kill in order to save others...' And so the tale went on. For a person not used to tell stories, who was usually just listening to them, she did a very fine job.

It was a tale of non-magical humans which was why Susan and Hannah who'd both grown up in Wizarding households were engrossed. They weren't the only ones. Somehow, Eloise's tale had drawn a small audience. There Ernie and Justin who'd joined them as soon as they'd seen them, and a few Second Years had come to overhear the story as well.

Harry had never heard the story of Groger, the Ogre despite having heard more tales than most did. He wasn't surprised therefore to see that most, including those from non-magical families, had never heard of that story.

It didn't take long and stories of Beetle, the Bard were told. Kertak had told him those and it amused Harry to listen to some of the interpretations especially older students had created in the face of their childhood stories.

"Harry, you tell a story now," Susan spoke up when Ryan ended his rather interesting version of the Deathly Hallows, "Do you know any good ones?"

He knew several. The question was what kind of story he wanted to tell.

A goblin tale for sure, but he wondered what Hannah could bear, really. He wouldn't tell anything with a tragic ending, but in spite of Evol's Tale ending happily. The story itself was sad more often than not.

Then, he smiled. He'd asked Kertak what stories he could tell in the Magical World and what he'd rather keep to himself. After counselling with Natruk, he'd said what stories not to tell. There was only one tale Kertak had urged him to convey...

"Enter, stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sin of greed,

For those who take, but do not earn,

Must pay most dearly in their turn,

So if you seek beneath our floors

A treasure that was never yours,

Thief, you have been warned, beware,

Of finding more than treasure there.

'Thus nacào'm, the Great Warning of Gringotts, is called and you shall receive knowledge of its origin.

'It began many years ago, when Wizard and Witch decided to leave their fellow brothers and sisters in order to create a society that was hidden from the curious eyes of those without magic. They retreated into the shadows and built their barriers with only few remaining behind.

'Lines, ropes, everything was cut that could be cut, up until there was a single question left'

'What to do with the goods of our ancestors? How to deal with what we possess when all connections had to sever? Whom to trust with the worldly goods?'

'The wizard and the witch needn't think for long. Of course, the goblins! The goblins, who else but the honourable goblins?'"

And so he told the tale of wizards and witches approaching goblins, the hard bargain they'd driven until the tunnel system of Gringotts was built. The story was filled with dry humour and especially older students listening in laughed every once in a while.

"... 'And they stood arm in arm wondering what to say to keep intruders at bay.

'Enter, stranger.'"

At that point, he finished. Harry had noticed that some of the chatter had subsided somewhat, but he hadn't expected that so many people would start listening in. But storytelling had a magic of its own. One always found an audience.

"You think it's true?" Eloise asked with a smile on her face.

"I don't know. It's the only story I have of wizards and witches working side by side with goblins, so I guess some of it is right. But you mustn't forget that a 'tale is a tale. There's always an entire dog attached,'" he recited what a certain old homeless man named Sully told him many times, "There's a big difference between a story and history. However, history has a similar problem. It's over. Often the people who've been there are no longer alive. All we have are their statements, though we have more of a reliable way of documentation these days... In the non-magical world, of course. I know that the wizarding society has been working with memory

spells for a long time, but every memory can be tampered with. I know it sounds paranoid, but never stop viewing another person's story critically. Emotion can meddle with a memory... Shame can cause you to present your own actions as heroic. Hatred might misrepresent the person you dislike. Just keep that in mind and you'll hear what really happened, even though what was told is a lie."

"Hey, kids," Linda came up from behind, "I hate to break it to you, but it's time to go to bed."

Harry smiled at the prefect's choice of words. He wasn't often called 'kid,' but it felt good. Safe.

They got up from the furniture (just like their first evening at Hogwarts Harry had to wake up Hannah) and wished each other a good night before entering their dormitories.

The first week was over... He definitely liked it here.

It was a good thing they'd decided to go outside yesterday for it was rainy and rather cold by the time Harry got up. And that was at six o'clock. He hadn't made any plans for breakfast and since he didn't expect people to arrive early, he was in no hurry.

He was following his morning routines. Not unlike at St Mary's, he used the quiet hours to study and practise. However, no matter how much he enjoyed sitting in the quiet Common Room, he never thought it possible to miss a certain tree with a bowtruckle as inhabitant and protector that much.

Most of his schoolbooks he'd read through, but he wasn't that practised at learning a text by heart by merely reading it once, which was why he reread some of the chapters he'd already looked at. He was also practising the wand movements and the ways of holding a wand.

Though curling his fingers around the magical piece of wood always gave him a certain feeling of safety, not every movement came naturally. Certain wrist movements were jerky, especially when he was holding the wand neutrally with only the fingertips touching it. The neutral way of holding a wand limited a person's motions significantly. It was definitely his least favourite grip. Merely holding

it was fine enough, but the second you had to move your hand it became a struggle. Wondering if anybody else thought so, he decided to watch the professors and older students more carefully when they were using a neutral charm.

The transfiguration stance was his favourite. It was subtle and precise.

The first students came down when Harry was deeply engrossed into Sanitas and his Encyclopaedia of Medical Herbs.

The owner of the bookshop had been right. He didn't understand half of the knowledge the encyclopaedia conveyed, mainly because he didn't know the scientific or medical terms.

'Hyperthermia' he could guess well enough, but what, in earth's name, were 'pancreatits' and 'hyperparathyreoidism'? He wondered if Madame Pomfrey could give him a few hints of what books to read.

His entire knowledge in first aid was based on experience; he'd never had anybody to teach him... He'd been forced to act in moments of chaos. Another reason why he was looking forward to learning from Madame Pomfrey. He hated not knowing what to do. He hated feeling helpless. It had cost too much.

After wishing Trinky a good morning, he walked into the Great Hall where Hedwig was already waiting. Arriving right by her side he thanked her and opened his package.

Apparently, Kertak was interacting with Char a bit more frequently. He knew that because, on one hand Kertak said so in his letter (notebook, more like), on the other because of Char's drawings.

Alex had written a short report on how everyone was.

Tommy had started to notice Harry's absence and, given by the report and Kertak's letter, he wasn't taking it very well. He didn't sleep through the nights and was very quiet. The little boy wasn't chatty, but he was usually a very active child. It gave the eleven-year-old a painful jolt.

He'd known this would happen, but it hurt nevertheless.

Hedwig hooted softly as if asking what was wrong. Absently, he caressed her feathers as he went on.

Grey and Luke, both attending to school, were otherwise occupied than missing his presence. As long as their nightmares didn't happen, there wouldn't be any problems.

He'd warned Alex, though. And Char. And Kertak.

When the days got colder, Luke's nightmares returned... Thankfully, Char had witnessed it often enough to know what to do. Grey's problem weren't the nightmares, but there were triggers that tore his mind into his past, as if he was back in Hell. Thankfully, Char knew what to do as well and since they were both attending to the same school, he could keep Grey from shutting down completely.

It scared Harry to the bones that Grey might shut down (as so many had). Especially in the face of an aggressive, male adult he just froze. Usually, he hated them, didn't go near them within a range of twenty feet unless forced, but there were moments he just...

Harry sighed. There was nothing he could do about it. Inform Alex and Kertak, so they would get Char as quickly as possible. That was all he could do for now.

Five-year-old Sara was otherwise occupied than missing Harry, he noticed with a smile. Primary school started and there was an entire paragraph in Alex's letter seemingly dictated by the girl telling him how she'd already found a friend, Rachel, and how much fun it was to study. Proudly, she told him how much she already knew in comparison to the other children. That girl's inner strength was unequalled, Harry knew, to be such a happy child despite having lived in Hell for three months.

He'd shielded her, of course. Sullivan had hardly ever seen her, and she was the only former inhabitant of Hell who had never been marked. Nevertheless, she'd seen too much.

Reading Kertak's message made him smile brightly. He'd been watching Sara and, unless he was completely mistaken, Harry had been right in his estimation that Sara was a witch.

There was a chance that his little charge might come to Hogwarts one day. That thought lifted Harry's mood considerably.

"Watching you read mail from your family is like an in-depth study on human emotion," Theo stated dryly. Harry had noticed that a friend was approaching, but he didn't know them well enough to distinguish them from each other. That always took a while, three to four months, before he was capable of it.

"I'm glad to contribute to your studies of human's nature," Harry replied as he turned and smiled at the tall boy, "Sit down. Where are the others?"

"Apparently, Millicent and Blaise are both firm believers in the principle of sleeping in on weekends," Theo grinned, "Not as if you were familiar with that concept."

"I did sleep in," Harry protested.

"Until when? Half past six?" was the cocky reply.

"Scratch the half past," Harry muttered. However, his smile matched the one of the Slytherin.

"How did detention go?" the tall boy asked instead of commenting Harry's 'insane sleeping pattern' as Blaise had called it yesterday.

"Fine," Harry said and informed Theo shortly what had occurred. The boy, who was filling his plate with some bacon and bread, listened carefully.

"See? There was no reason to worry," he stated when Harry finished.

"I didn't... Was I that obvious?" the orphan winced when he recognized evasion to be futile. Theo wasn't the kind of person to fool.

"Not to the rest of them, but... Yes," was the plain reply and Harry snorted at the matter-of-factness of the statement.

They were silent for a moment before Theo said bluntly, "Someone hurt you." Emerald eyes looked sharply into brown ones with shades of green.

"Everybody gets hurt by someone else some time or another," Harry retorted dismissively. He was careful not to give anything away, though denial in itself would be fruitless and stupid. People were asking less questions when you answered their initial ones to their satisfaction.

"Not like this," Theo's voice softened significantly, "You saw the Thestrals pulling the carriages for the older students."

Theodore was perceptive and intelligent, but his words allowed Harry to deflect, "So can you." The taller boy accepted the rebuke, though not happily. His gaze darted back to his food, but he no longer seemed hungry. He didn't even see his plate. Harry knew that look. He'd seen it too many times.

Kindly, he laid a hand on Theo's shoulder, but he didn't say anything. His eyes darted around the room for he didn't want anyone to witness Theo's pain. Grief was very personal and the kid was a private character. Thankfully, there weren't many students in the room and those who were either were occupied eating or talking with schoolmates.

"I was seven," Theo told quietly, his face focused on the table, "She..." His voice was hoarse all of a sudden, filled with an old ache that was still fresh, no matter how many years had passed, "She was sick for a long time."

Harry had experienced both and still didn't know which hurt more: sudden death or the one that came with a warning.

"January 1986," Harry stated just as quietly, "And my parents of course. And my aunt and cousin only little time after. But I can't remember those times. Not really. The first time I witnessed someone d... leave was January 1986, don't ask me the exact date," he added for some reason.

He hadn't even been six years old and his protector was already gone. He still missed Sully sometimes, but meeting Kertak and Natruk half a year later had helped soothing that pain. Anyway, Sully had been the first to teach him anything. He'd taught him the rules. He'd kept him alive.

And for that, he would always honour him.

"The first time?" Theo stared at him, shocked, his own pain forgotten. Harry nearly groaned. That had been an incredibly stupid thing to say.

"I've been living with a lot of children over the years, Theo. It would be wishful thinking to assume that all of them reach adulthood," he kept his voice even. He hadn't expected such a serious subject this early in the morning. Thankfully, Theo seemed to be sharing his opinion for he didn't pry.

They looked at each other again in a moment of deep understanding for the other person's sorrow before Harry's lips twitched in amusement, "'Others' don't really see it, you know."

"I've noticed," Theodore responded, "Why do you think that is?"

"How should I know? I'm not an Other," it didn't sound as harshly as the vocabulary indicated. What he received in return was a smirk, but the taller boy sobered quickly.

"Thanks for counting me in," Theo said, looking sincere.

"Likewise." He was very well aware that Theo didn't approach many people and it honoured him that he'd decided to tell, however little, of his loss.

The rest of their breakfast was spent in companionable silence.

It was possible that their friendship had started earlier, but Harry preferred to think that this morning was the actual foundation of it.

Harry spent Saturday morning writing to St Mary's. This time, he apologized to Hedwig profusely for sending her on yet another journey and promised her that it would get less complicated once he had a routine. The offer to send a school-owl had been met with such a vicious look from his Familiar; he didn't dare saying anything else on the matter.

Just as he was securing the package, a group of older students came in Harry had never seen so far. They were deep in conversation.

"No, it stood in the paper yesterday. Nothing was taken from the vault," one of the teenagers said. He wasn't very tall, but he looked rather muscular, especially considering he couldn't be older than sixteen.

"It scares me to think that someone could break into Gringotts," a lean teenager to his right said.

Harry's heart threatened to jump out of his chest when he heard that.

"Someone broke into Gringotts?" Harry gasped receiving searching looks from the older students, "Was anybody hurt? When did that happen?"

Surely, Kertak would tell him such a thing!

"Almost a month ago," the tall teenager said with his eyebrows furrowed, "There were no wizards or witches present, so nobody was hurt." Harry nearly snapped that he was more worried about the goblins working at Gringotts, but the shock kept his mouth shut. Why had Kertak kept this piece of information to himself?

"Does anybody have a quill, pen or pencil with you?" Harry asked forcing his voice to sound calm, but his emerald eyes flashed in anger. He wasn't short-tempered, but right now it boiled beneath the surface. Had Kertak been within reach, he would have received a quite a bit of a tongue-lashing.

The muscular boy handed over quill and ink which he took with a short 'Dàio' before correcting his lingual slip. He sat on the ground, extracted a separate sheet of parchment he'd put into his robes earlier and wrote quickly 'Gringotts' along with three Runes.

"I know that one," the tall teenager said gesturing at the last symbol, "That means secrecy, but what does the rest of them stand for?"

"'Theft' and 'hurt,' or 'pain,' depending on the context," Harry replied shortly. Kertak would know that the ambiguity was deliberate. He knew him well enough for that. "Thanks for the quill," he said to the boy who'd given it to him.

Not two minutes later, Hedwig left the Owlery.

Theft at Gringotts!

'There's so much filth on the floor and we wouldn't want to put the entire goblin race to shame by having stale Gringotts Headquarters, now, would we? It would be very embarrassing for the entire Magical World of Great Britain.'

Even if there had been stains on the floor as Mr Malfoy had said, this was worse a hundred times.

This was a shame for Goblin Society cutting deeper than any knife ever could. Gringotts was safe, the entire area was buzzing with protective magic, but someone had managed to break through the safety wards. Harry shuddered to think who was powerful enough to accomplish that.

But Kertak had said nothing. Natruk was the apprentice of Vanrica Kandril; he'd most likely been inside of the building when the intruder had broken in.

How could he have kept this piece of knowledge to himself?

Angrily, Harry strode down the staircase leading into the Owlery and almost collided with some students carrying letters.

'Get yourself under control!' he scolded himself. When he was angry, his alertness suffered. He stopped listening to his surroundings, didn't notice the walls' whispers for it was drowned out by the sound of blood rushing into his ears. When fear or hatred was mingled with the fury, his instincts sharpened, but right now the sentiment next to ire was disappointment.

Shakily, he leaned against a wall and let the consoling warmth of the castle's walls rush over him.

"Harry, are you okay?" a voice he knew was heard from across the corridor. Hermione, Neville and Ron overcame the distance rather quickly.

"You alright, mate?" Ron asked, clearly worried. Hermione, who'd called him, surveyed him with attentive eyes.

Harry couldn't help but smile at the display of concern, "Fine. It's kind of complicated to explain. When I get angry, a familiar wall's warmth calms me down."

Now that was met by incredulous looks.

"The castle's walls are not exactly warm, Harry," Hermione said softly and, as if demonstrating her statement, she touched the wall and shuddered.

The underage wizard with green eyes had to suppress a curse. He definitely wasn't himself right now when he lost control of his vocabulary. Well, they were wizards and witches like him, maybe they'd had similar feelings at their parents' homes and simply didn't feel fully integrated to Hogwarts yet, "The surface is cool, yes, but the sensation of warmth comes from the inside, beneath the skin, not through it."

Either they had no idea what he was talking about or his explanation was insufficient for they all looked at him with a puzzled expression. Instead of rephrasing his description, he asked them where they were going which was replied that they were going to their Common Room to get Ron's chessboard because Neville wanted to learn the rules.

"Mind if I come with you? I'll try to explain matters a little better," Harry suggested and the three Gryffindors agreed immediately.

As they walked upstairs towards the 'Gryffindor tower' as Hermione explained him the location of their Common Room and dormitories was called.

"It's kind of a long story, but I'll try to keep it short. In goblin culture it is thought that buildings, as they grow older develop some sort of individual existence..." he hesitated, but Hermione chimed in.

"Yes, I've read about that principle. Hogwarts, A History says that the castle has some sort of collective memory. It doesn't know anything of what happens outside of the protection wards, but everything that happened within them is somehow registered."

"Exactly," Harry concurred, "Like this, the castle knows which path to take, what's dangerous and what not. It's not just Hogwarts. I grew

up in London and the buildings there have a collective memory as well, though not as plainly and powerfully as Hogwarts." Whenever an old building was torn down in order to build a new one, it was like the city's skin was cut open, "When I was little, I learned to listen in. I don't see memories, mostly it's just sensations of warmth I learned to interpret. The walls themselves can be icy, but that warmth I feel on the inside, about an inch beneath my skin. It can have a rather calming effect when you're upset."

Ron's eyebrows were raised, Neville looked in awe and Hermione was excited, "I have to look up what that's called. That is very interesting," then she grew serious, "What were you upset about?"

"The Gringott's break-in," Harry confessed, "I didn't know anything about it and was kind of taken by surprise when I heard some students talk about it."

"That was a while ago," Ron said, "But it's scary. Dad says it must've been a powerful Dark wizard to get round Gringotts... Thankfully, they didn't steal anything because said vault was emptied a day prior to the attempted theft."

"Doesn't matter to me," Harry contradicted, "They shouldn't have been able to get into Gringotts in the first place. Goblins are very proud and honourable, you see. Whoever was in charge of security that day will feel deeply ashamed. To the Wizarding World, it's a scandal, to Goblin Society it's a punch in the face. It's bad," he added when he was unable to explain that such an atrocious error in the security wards of Gringotts and the disgrace that came along with it would cause physical sensations of pain to those responsible for it. He just hoped Natruk was okay.

"I never thought of it that way," Neville said looking thoughtful, then his voice dropped, almost inaudibly he whispered, "People just got scared thinking it might be You-Know-Who involved."

Harry frowned. He remembered the short conversation he'd had with Hagrid after he'd told him that Lily and James Potter both had attended to Hogwarts. The topic of Voldemort they hadn't been able to evade once they'd started talking of Harry's parents for that wizard was the reason they weren't here with him.

'Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don't believe it... Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on, because Laciuz Longbottom had something about him that stumped him, alright.' It grieved him to remember that look of warmth in Hagrid's eyes at the mention of the Boy Who Lived. Harry's impressions of Neville's brother didn't exactly speak in his favour. He just hoped Hagrid wouldn't be disappointed.

"What about you?" Harry asked curiously. He'd never talked to Kertak about Voldemort, except for what he told him a while before Harry had come to know that the infamous Dark wizard was responsible for his parents' death. After, they'd talked about many things, but neither the Potters nor their murderer had been a part of it.

Harry felt ashamed. His parents had died for him, but he knew so little of them. The present had been too overwhelming ever since the Hogwarts letter had arrived, but he really wanted to take a look into the past as soon as possible.

"My mother said that there's nothing we have to worry about," Neville replied earnestly, but he didn't look very convinced. Harry understood the implication though.

He couldn't imagine what it had to feel like to be a target. Surely, his parents had been targets, but Harry himself wasn't. He was a faceless eleven-year-old. Naturally, he was a Potter, and Harry wasn't naïve enough to believe that Voldemort would let him alive should he return to power and meet him, but Neville lived with another fear entirely. His twin brother would be the first on Voldemort's list making him a very likely target.

"He won't be powerful enough to do such a thing, Neville," Harry calmed, "I think your mother is right."

"So, you think he's still alive?" Ron asked flinching at the thought.

"Don't know, but Hagrid seems to think so and I trust his opinion," the orphan stated. There was a moment of fearful silence before Harry noticed the portrait of a fat lady. That was another pathway

and given the sensation, it was the entrance into the Gryffindor tower.

A/N:

Disclaimer: The story of Groger the Ogre wasn't invented by me. It's not mine.

When I was a kid I used to listen to an audio book called "Weltberühmte Märchen lesen und hören." The story of Groger was part of it... Therefore, it's not mine. I didn't recite the beginning of the story (or rather, a translation thereof) either. I thought it more authentic if I just recalled what I once heard.

The English translation of the audio book's title is "Reading and Listening to World-renowned fairytales."

A/N: Again... THANK YOU. Thank you so much for all the reviews, story alerts and those who added my story to their favourites! I enjoy reading your reviews and it makes me happy every time when I see that another person put my story on their alert list.

Special thanks to MissGoalie75, my amazing Beta, who's worked late in order to correct this chapter.

I think that I personally thanked the majority of those who've signed their reviews. At this point, I want to thank them again and all the anonymous reviewers whom I can't reply to and those reviewers whom I've forgotten to give a proper reply.

Question: I have a little question. Storytelling is an important theme in this story. Is anybody interested in having Harry tell an entire story? So far, I've mainly used the beginnings and the endings of tales. Thanks for answering.

Chapter 10, Part Two: Settle In, Settle Down

Ron spoke the password ('Fortuna major') and they invited Harry to come along. Since nothing warned him to stay out, he followed.

Neville needed their help to get into the portrait hole. As they reached the Common Room, Harry had to stifle a laugh: not unlike the Hufflepuff Common Room, it was decorated in the House's colours.

The room was a bit crowded, and it took Harry a moment to take in who was sitting there. He hardly knew anybody, but there were the twins and Lee Jordan with their heads bowed over some piece of parchment which, Harry was relatively sure, wasn't homework.

Another Weasley, or at least a boy with flaming red hair, approached them with a scowl on his face. By the way he started talking to the twins, Harry was sure he had to be another brother. That had to be Percy Weasley, the third Weasley brother and the oldest who was still going to school as Ron had told him last Tuesday.

He forced himself to look in another direction and recognized Laci Longbottom. He was sitting with Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan and judging by the smile on his face, he was having a good time. His features seemed soft and relaxed, alternating between smiling and laughing.

This was not some manipulative mind game. He was a mere eleven-year-old student enjoying the presence of his friends.

The Boy Who Lived was just like Harry.

He preferred being close to his friends and could do without having to deal with anybody else.

It was a surprise, to be frank. Harry disliked him and the feeling was mutual, but seeing him interact with Seamus and Dean showed him that there was another side to the tall boy he'd refused to see before.

He was a good friend.

Meanwhile, Neville approached his brother from behind. He looked a bit shy and unsure when he pinched his shoulder.

Nobody should be so insecure approaching a sibling.

When Laciuss' head snapped around, Neville started to examine the ground almost instantly. Harry could see them having a conversation seemingly without words for neither person's lips moved. Wordlessly, the tall boy got up and they approached another staircase leading upstairs.

"Neville is borrowing Laciuss' chessmen," Ron explained, "It must be so great having a famous wizard like the Boy Who Lived in the family." He sighed.

Harry spun his head around, incredulous, "You think so? Imagine being in another person's shadow all the time. That's hard, even if you like staying out of the spotlight. Neville's shy, yes, but ever wondered why he's so shy?"

He spoke no further for they were approached by Percy (he had to be for Ron groaned when he saw who was coming closer) looking about as stern as before.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked haughtily.

"You must be Percy," Harry began trying to keep his voice down, "I'm Harry Potter, I'm a friend of Ron as well as Fred and George. It's nice to..." Before he could continue, he was interrupted, causing Harry to grit his teeth.

"You are a member of the Hufflepuff house, Harry. You have no right to enter the Common Room," then he looked angrily at Ron, "Two points from Gryffindor for betraying the password to someone outside of your House." He straightened his back and therefore displayed his considerable height.

Ron's ears turned red and he snarled, "Percy, come on! You're being a stupid prat, as usual."

Harry stared at Ron. He was used to sibling's quarrel, but he wasn't used to them being carried out in front of an audience, "Ron," he said mildly, "He's right. I shouldn't be here. I'll be waiting outside."

Thanks, Percy, it was..." 'nice' would be a blatant lie, "Enlightening to talk to you."

Once he was outside of the Gryffindor Common Room, he leaned against a wall and sighed. Gaining friends with siblings wasn't the easiest of things, he noticed.

He'd met some children over the years with brothers and sisters, but either they were separated from them or they were all they had. You were friends with one, you were automatically friends with the other, but you never got as close to them as the respective sibling. You knew and you respected that.

The Others seemed to live by different rules. You could easily become friends with one, but you didn't have to be friendly with their older brother or sister.

Harry wasn't sure he liked that.

"I don't know you, young lion, though you are familiar," the Fat Lady said all of a sudden. Harry turned around and regarded the portrait in front of him.

"My parents were members of this house," he said, "Lily and James Potter."

The woman's round face lit up, "Of course! Lily Evans and James Potter. How come I haven't seen you before?"

"I'm a Hufflepuff," he explained.

Evans. Evans was his mother's maiden name.

He hadn't planned on visiting Hagrid today, but the urge to do so alone and to ask questions about his parents was overwhelming in the face of this small piece of information.

Another question came to mind almost instantly. What about his grandparents? Professor Dumbledore and Hagrid surely would've said something if they were still alive. Then he thought of Gringotts and due to that, he recalled that information wasn't always given freely.

"Oh, I'm sorry, there are some people who want to leave the Common Room. It was nice talking to you," the lady said before turning her portrait aside.

"Sorry about my idiotic brother," Ron started as soon as they saw each other, "He's so annoying sometimes. He's such a stickler to rules and always acts as if he was our mother when she's not around."

"I'm sure he just worries about you," Harry contradicted, recalling the hundreds of times he'd had similar discussions with Christina, Mark and Johnny. They were only few years younger than him and they hadn't been to Hell, therefore they didn't view Harry as guardian the way Grey and Luke sometimes did, "It's alright..." 'Now or never,' "Hey, guys? Is it okay if I leave you for the time being? I'd like to visit Hagrid."

"We could go with you," Hermione suggested.

"No," Harry said immediately, "No, thanks. It's..." 'private,' "I need to talk to him about something and I'd rather like to do this alone."

Ron frowned a bit, but he nodded. Neville simply accepted what he'd said, but Hermione looked rather curious, "Is everything alright?"

"Yes, Hermione," he replied calmly, "I'm fine. I just forgot to ask him something last Wednesday."

They were walking alongside each other before the Gryffindors turned right towards the Great Hall, while Harry grabbed his hood and pulled it over his head to face the rainy weather.

He didn't particularly like rain. The damped clothes and the shivering after standing in the pouring rain for hours waiting for someone... anyone to share something. And if it was a single apple out of a shopping bag. The cold following rain was more intense than falling snow.

He crossed the grounds faster than he'd have on a sunny day and knocked at his friend's door. The gigantic man opened almost instantly.

"Harry!" surprised, Hagrid stood aside and hurried him inside, "What are yeh doin'? This could be the death of yeh. Come in! Sit."

"I thought you might be at home," Harry explained, gesturing outside while caressing Fang. After having tried to knock him down out of sheer delight at the Harry's arrival, Fang seemed to have found his calling in warming the eleven-year-old after said child sat down on the large couch Fang had occupied before Harry came.

Hagrid appeared with the largest towel Harry had ever come across of in his entire life. A moment later, the underage wizard was wrapped tight enough for Harry to sympathize with butterflies before they emerged from a cocoon. The Keeper of Keys noticed it only after he saw Harry's inability to grab the cup of tea he'd handed over to him. He loosened the towel a bit before asking Harry why he was here.

"I never asked you, Hagrid, and I don't really have an excuse. Life's been turned upside down, yes, but that's... You knew my parents," he started anew when he noticed he was talking nonsense, "What were they like? I'm not talking about the general things you said, them being top of their class, them being very good people. I..." suddenly, the question kept spilling out of his mouth and he had neither intention nor power to stop them, "What did they do for a living? What was Mum's favourite colour? Who were their closest friends? Apart from Aunt Tuney, are there any other aunts and uncles? What about my grandparents? I want to know if my dad preferred scrambled eggs over fried ones and what subject my mother liked the most. What was my dad's favourite word, did he like stories? Petunia wasn't a witch, did she ever see Hogwarts? How'd they meet? Was Dad more of a cat or a dog person? Were there any subjects or spells they struggled with?" He wanted to keep going with random questions, but his throat constricted and he couldn't talk anymore. Desperately, he sought his large friend's gaze.

"Oh..." Hagrid whispered looking so sad Harry almost started to cry. For a man so big, who was rather clumsy and rough most of the time, it was remarkable how carefully he embraced the little boy.

"Knew yer parents, Harry. Not that well, but I knew 'em. Will tell yeh what I know..."

Like this, Harry found out that his mother's favourite colour was sky-blue though she rarely wore such colours. While James Potter's sense of humour was rather straight-forward and light, his mother's was more like Harry's, built on wits, but judging by what Hagrid told him, it had been very easy to make her laugh. Both of them, really.

They'd spent a majority of their mature life involved in war, but their kindred spirits had never been broken.

"Yeh made them smile so much, Harry. Remember the day yeh were born. James was a nervous wreck that day. He couldn't stand still. He kept talkin' ter the Healers until one threatened ter tie 'im up," then he chuckled into memory, "When they finally let 'im ter her, yeh weren't there yet. She was in labour and we were waitin' outside hearing James mumblin' about breathin' and that she should try ter relax. Was the first time I ever heard 'er swear, 'Merlin's pants! James Potter, if you don't shut up right this instant I'm personally going to strangle you and I don't need my wand for that." Harry started to laugh. Really laugh. He loved hearing this. It was better than any fictional story could ever be, "Yeh were their world, Harry," Hagrid said seriously after their laughter had ceased, "James once said how much it terrified him ter have yeh. He was so solemn that evenin'. He was never scared, Harry, of nothin'. He stood up ter You-Know-Who himself, but having ter take care of a little baby frightened him."

The young boy smiled a bit at that. It was good to hear that. Being scared of parenting was a good thing. It meant that they cared.

He also heard that Petunia was the only sibling either of his parents had and that there were no grandparents left. Apparently, his mother's father had died when she was only fourteen. The Potters had died a year before he was born, of old age as it seemed. James had been born very late into their lives.

"What about my mum's mother?" he asked.

Sadly, Hagrid lowered his head, "Was a fine woman, Katherine Evans, she was. Met her a couple of times. Was always kind ter me, showed me how caring Muggles can be. She and yer aunt, really..." Tears started to fall from the big black eyes, "There were just too many people dyin' with too little time in between ter grieve. Parents

shouldn't bury their own kids. She perished a week after yer aunt's and cousin's death."

Harry bit his lips and looked away, his eyes started to twinge, he could feel his eyes moisten and quickly started to breathe to get himself under control. A moment later he was wrapped in strong arms.

"So, I'm the only person left of the Evans' and Potters," that thought saddened him. Char was all alone, too, so was Sara. They had nobody but the people whom they'd chosen to be their family.

To his surprise, Hagrid, after nodding in sorrow, gave him a very small smile, "But what a person, Harry, what a person! Yeh're the pride of both, and they have a reason ter be proud. Yeh making friends with other houses... Yer mother didn't care much for them either. Yeh sticking up ter the likes of Malfoy... Yer father would be proud," there was silence, before he added, "And he'd have given yeh quite a talkin' to fer provoking a fully grown wizard. But he'd have been proud." Harry smiled in gratitude, "And yeh don't have ter be the last of the Potters and Evans', yeh know."

Harry's face turned bright red remarkably fast, "I'm eleven, Hagrid. Please, please, don't..." He wasn't naïve, he knew where the babies came from, but he really didn't need to be reminded of that. He had female friends, but the mere idea... Ugh! Who'd want that?

Hagrid chuckled, "Well, well. There's no hurry, is there? Yer parents could live due to the Potter heirloom, so they didn't need ter work. They were involved in multiple endeavours ter stop the war. Lily wanted ter start a long-term apprenticeship in Charms and Potions after the war was over. Yer dad's plans weren't sure, but he was exceptional at Transfiguration and he would've been a great instructor fer the Upper Years or further education after Hogwarts."

That was a hard to swallow. Of course, they'd wanted to stay in the world, but they'd been forced to die so he could live. It was just hard to imagine they'd had plans and dreams beyond their deaths.

"Yer mother got along well with many creatures, but yer father was more of a dog person. Jaw," he swallowed, "Yeh know, that was Fang's predecessor, had adored James though he was always left

behind when Siri...", he looked startled all of a sudden, eyes wide. Before he continued, he swallowed, "A good friend of his entered."

"Siri... Who?" Harry asked immediately. He'd noticed the hesitation, the avoidance of his gaze. Whatever it was, this was bad, "What are you not telling me?"

"It's not good ter dwell in the past, Harry," Hagrid mumbled.

"The past is all I have when it comes to my parents, Hagrid, there is no future," Harry contradicted. He simply wanted to know. It would hurt, the gigantic wizard's expression told him that much, but he was willing to pay the price.

"Yer father had three very close friends..." the man with the beetle-like eyes began and told him the story of four pranksters who had attended school together.

James Potter. Remus Lupin. Peter Pettigrew. Sirius Black.

He was told how much they'd frustrated the gamekeeper and their Head of House, Professor McGonagall, with the mischief they created. They'd hardly ever been caught for they'd been too talented, in a magical sense as well as in the face of their talent in covert operations. Especially Sirius Black and James Potter had impressed students and teachers alike with exceptional magical aptitude and accomplishment without ever being inclined to study much.

Their friendship had lasted for seven years and beyond until...

Sirius Black had turned sides working as a spy for Voldemort. He had been one of the few knowing the Potter's secret location (Hagrid himself hadn't known until after the tragedy).

"He betrayed them," Harry whispered, shaking like a leaf in the face of such treachery. He valued friendship beyond everything else and the mere thought someone would violate it like this, was..., "But from what you said... They were like brothers." Deceiving Kertak? Letting down Char? No! He knew people could be vile, but nobody would ever...

"They were, I guess," Hagrid said. The thought of Sirius made him angry, the betrayal furious and sad, "Yer dad's parents took Sirius in

after he ran away from home at sixteen. Bad blood, that Black family."

Harry's eyes widened. This was worse. So much worse. He knew his parents had been Others as children, but surely such a bond between Others was tighter than the empty talk of a megalomaniac (Kertak's and Dumbledore's explanations had told him this much of Voldemort's nature)?

"What happened af..." he swallowed drily, "What happened?"

"Black didn't come ter Godric's Hallow after. Only people who knew the place were the Longbottoms, the Potters, Dumbledore, Remus, Peter and Black... Remus came and Dumbledore made sure it wasn't him. Peter must've suspected Black. Went after him." Apparently, he'd confronted him in open street and had wanted to finish him off, but he hadn't even played close to Black's league and therefore had been torn into pieces due to a curse which killed a dozen non-magical, innocent people in the process.

"He's been sent to Azkaban," Hagrid said, and shuddered, "Don't know if yeh..."

"The Wizarding Prison. Yes, Kertak told me about that one. But he wasn't Kissed, was he?" Harry's feelings were mixed in the face of that.

The Dementor's Kiss, the ultimate punishment. There was no death row in Wizarding society, at least not in Great Britain. But there was punishment worse than death.

The loss of your soul.

Goblins were not quite as vulnerable to Dementors as humans, a fact the Wizarding World had mistaken for proof that a goblin's feelings were not as meaningful and deep as a human's. But that wasn't true, goblins had a natural form of protection from those creatures and they still suffered from a Dementor's attack. The Kiss had the same effect on humans as well as on goblins and Harry shuddered at the thought.

Sirius Black had committed a betrayal of a magnitude that could only be surpassed by killing Harry's parents himself. But did he deserve a Kiss?

When your soul was gone, how could you possibly feel remorse?

And then, Harry knew what he wished. He wanted Black to be in the same position as Cline, to beg for forgiveness but never to receive it.

One day, he wanted to face the man and ask him whether it had been worth it and why he did it. So, no, he didn't want Sirius Black to be Kissed.

"No... Harry, I shouldn't have told yeh that," Hagrid said sorrowfully, "Dumbledore didn't..."

"Had he told me that day, I might have gone insane. I'm glad he missed out that part of the story, as I'm glad you told me now. I know I'm only eleven, but I can handle it. I've handled worse."

"That doesn't mean yeh should be burdened with more," Hagrid opposed.

"Sister Augustine once said, 'A child in an orphanage never has a story to tell that is any less than tragic.' Death. Murder. Betrayal." Harry swallowed. How could Black betray his brother of choice? And why? "I grew up with people whose stories were just as tragic. Before last month I just belonged to those who didn't know." It was time to change topic, "What about Remus Lupin? Is he still alive?"

Hagrid nodded eagerly, obviously happy to have changed topic.

"Do you think... You say he was my dad's best friend," maybe even another brother, he couldn't tell for sure by what Hagrid had told him, "Do you think he'd be interested in..." "The son of his deceased friend?" "Talking to me sometime?"

He wasn't adoption material. He knew that.

He didn't want to be adopted. He didn't want to leave his family and adoption ultimately always led to departure.

But he wanted to hear more about his parents and, maybe, rekindle some of the bonds that had broken on Halloween ten years ago.

"I don't kno... I mean, I... I'll ask..." Helplessly, Hagrid stopped gesturing around wildly. The young boy covered the man's right thumb with his hand.

"It's okay. Judging by your answer I'd say you haven't seen him in a while," he suggested.

"He kind of disappeared after... after. Kept in touch with Dumbledore, but nobody else."

And who'd blame him? Harry couldn't even begin to understand what he'd felt. Losing his best friends, two due to the betrayal of the other.

"Yeh know what? I'll tell Dumbledore yeh'd like ter meet Remus," Hagrid's face lit up at the idea.

"You don't have to bother..." Harry began, but was interrupted by his friend, "Not a bother, Harry. Neither ter me nor Dumbledore. Don't ever think that."

"Dài... Thanks," he corrected immediately, but his slip, yet another lingual slip, led to a short discussion on goblin formalities that Hagrid was eager to learn.

He wasn't the most talented man in learning languages, Harry noticed, but his enthusiasm made up for that.

"So," Hagrid asked after a while, "When I say hello to you, I say Cracoonai?"

Harry shook his head smiling patiently and in amusement. When he saw the older man smile in return, Harry knew that making him smile had been Hagrid's goal. Which was why his smile widened a little more, "Kan-ru-kai. Kanrukai. It means... Well, I guess 'greetings' is the closest English expression that fits... Hagrid?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks. For taking your time," he would never be able to express how much it meant to him to hear about his parents. No matter how painful some revelations were.

"I never close up me door," was all Hagrid said in return.

Still wrapped in that towel Hagrid had borrowed him, Harry said goodbye and went back into the rain he'd come from. If the weather kept this up for a while, the first snow would fall soon.

A/N: Just a short update. I'm sorry for it being so short, but it was a good point to stop.

As always, thank you. Over 400 people have put this story on 'story alert' and I'm very happy about that :)

Special thanks to my Beta, MissGoalie75, and the reviewers of the last chapter:

lordamnesia, Bobmin356, bookworm19065, silver windflame, Nanchih, mudbloopotter05, laelruin, phoenixlight, Scandinavian Snapper, Axalia, In the Mix, anon, Emily, koolthegrey, momocolady, LoireLoa, inuyashaxkagome321 (sorry for possible miss-spellings), Isabelledawrd, kawa 7, Guppy and Silver. Thank you! I very much appreciate it.

A/N: Thanks for all those who told me what they'd think should I post an entire tale told by Harry... I decided not to do it. Definitely not for a very long time (judging by my notes, "Building Bridges" won't end after Harry's first year at Hogwarts... Unless you beg me to stop writing). The storytelling theme will come across in the same way it has before. Harry recalling a passage or two, or him telling the beginning and/or the end of one. Again, thanks for stating your opinion and sorry to those who wished otherwise. I'm always open for suggestions when it comes to this particular theme.

A/N: I wrote it at the beginning, but the following note is an important reminder... This story is AU. Some things happening in canon did not happen here and vice versa. The events at Godric's Hollow were not canon (the Longbottoms being there for one), and it's important you understand the following: what is told, doesn't have to be necessarily true. The characters themselves might be misinformed.

Thanks for taking your time to read this ridiculously long author's note ;-)

Chapter 10 Part Three: Settle In, Settle Down

Harry was eating dinner at the Hufflepuff table when Kertak's notebook suddenly appeared next to him... He'd definitely have to ask Trinky how the house-elves managed to do that.

He opened it and started to read. It seemed to have been written with a bit more haste than usual.

I'm keeping Hedwig here until the storm rushing over London ceases a bit. However, answering you is too important to wait so I had this message delivered straight into the Hogwarts kitchen (I apologize for being so vague, it is a matter I am not allowed to speak of).

He knew that, Harry thought angrily. He knew there were things Kertak was not allowed to tell him.

But this had been written in the newspaper, possibly even the front page.

First of all: Nilràu Natruk is well; I know he was in the forefront of your mind. Be assured I would have told you had he been hurt.

Of course, he would have.

However, five goblins have been murdered or harmed to the point they shall never recover. You don't know any of their names, but one of them was Nicara's older brother.

Saddened, Harry closed his eyes, feeling for the clans who'd lost a member and for Nicara. He knew her, not well, but she was a childhood friend of Kertak and they'd met every once in a while. Harry was fond of her, a feeling that was reciprocated.

Nilràu Natruk is ashamed of what happened, as are we all, but he did not suffer any physical sensation of dishonour since the security of the high-security vaults had not been part of his responsibilities that day.

Despite himself, Harry had to grin admiring his brother's talent at telling the truth without ever giving too much away on Natruk's occupation.

Forgive me.

Of course he would. As if there was any alternative to forgiveness. He simply wanted to know why.

My only excuse for not telling you is that I wanted to spare you yet another matter of concern. I know how much you care for my kin's honour, and I didn't want to torment you with a piece of information you would not be able to do anything about.

I should have anticipated that there would be gossip; that you'd get your hands on the latest news concerning Gringotts and that you would investigate.

Please, forgive my folly. I will not attempt to repeat such a mistake in the future.

Anger and disappointment disappeared as fast as they'd come. Kertak knew Harry didn't like it when people made decisions for him, but in this case it was understandable and therefore acceptable.

I must not tell you too much and what I'm telling you should be dealt with strictest confidence...

Harry quickly checked whether he was being watched before recalling that nobody but himself could read the words written on the pages in front of him.

So far, nobody has found evidence to prove how exactly the thief managed to break in, but let me tell you so much: as you've noticed at a very young age the security of Gringotts is essentially a complex net created by rune and innate goblin magic. Multiple layers create a tight and strong protective shield; in the case of the high security vaults it is even more intense.

The intruder must have somehow found small cracks in the net and used it to create a loophole. It was a wizard's deed. After the examination of the casualties' bodies, there is no doubt about that.

And yes, it was a single wizard's or witch's deed. All five bodies were murdered by the same magical signature. Whose it was, they do not know.

Harry, I hope when you visit Gringotts next time, all of this will be resolved. If it isn't, please forgive the demeanour displayed by some members of my kin.

The eleven-year-old furrowed his eyes, feeling concern. What was Kertak trying to say?

The relationship between wizards and goblins has always been strained, often tainted by dishonour on both sides...

He knew that. Impatiently, he continued reading; an uneasy feeling started to form in his gut and it had nothing to do with dinner.

This occurrence has once again hardened the fronts, and, you've never met them for I wanted to spare you the pain, but the Sacùr Y Anà...

The 'Union of Equality.'

I'm ashamed to call them fellow goblins; they have been gaining influence in Goblin Society. This is less because of that one villain breaking the wards of Gringotts but because the Daily Prophet, the Wizarding World's mouthpiece, has failed to note the death of five of ours. They had been informed of the victims to the crime, but they have not mentioned it since. You understand the frustration we feel.

He did. Harry felt anger burning his chest. He did understand.

However, the Sacùr Y Anà is an organisation that is neither honourable nor remotely acceptable. They are loud imbeciles believing that respect can be gained through violence. They were formed in the seventeenth century and one of the Rebellions, the Dark Rebellion that began 1721, has been led by this particular group and they have existed ever since.

In the nineteenth century they nearly disappeared, but with the rise of He Who Must Not Be Named and the slaughter of countless innocent house-elves and non-magical folk as well as general impropriety towards Goblin Society their influence has increased ...

It grieves me to see that some of my fellow goblins are susceptible to the call for violence.

A feeling Harry could relate to all too well. It hurt him twice over, actually.

He was a wizard and somehow, though not living in this society for long, he felt responsible when they acted unjustly. But he was also... He wasn't a goblin, he knew that, but the goblins had welcomed him with open arms.

Or at least, some of them had. Kertak might think this was news for him. But Harry was a street kid. He'd had been rejected often enough, had seen the look ('You are not welcome here!') often enough to recognize it in goblins.

It grieved him nevertheless to hear of that Union.

And things like this reminded him plainly why he despised violence. It always led to more violence, a never-ending vicious circle.

"You okay, Harry?" he heard Cedric's concerned voice.

Harry had to grin, "You know, this is becoming a habit. Me zoning out at dinner and you noticing it." Cedric returned the grin.

"You can see something on those pages, can't you?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's charmed so only I can read it. One of my best frie..." He stopped instantly. He'd been asked to explain many things this week; questions asked by people he'd most likely call his friends in the future. Like that, he'd realized something: they were only curious; their inquiries weren't meant to be condescending. He understood that now. And Cedric didn't even know how to spell 'condescending.' "My brother gave it to me."

"Your goblin friend?" Susan asked curiously sitting to Harry's left.

"Yes," he answered, "His name's Kertak."

"What's he like?" Hannah chimed in.

Harry only smiled, "I've long given up trying to find the right words to describe him. He's a brother and one of my best friends. The only person with whom I share a comparable bond is Char."

"Your Muggle friend," Susan concluded, "It's an odd name."

Harry's smile turned into a grin, "His name's Richard, but everybody calls him Char."

As the conversation continued, Harry had no chance to finish the letter, but he'd seen there was only one passage left. He knew what would stand there without reading it.

I apologize again for my secrecy. You had a right to know, much more so than those imbeciles working at the newspaper. Forgive me.

Tacùn,

Kertak

Before Harry went to bed that night, he wrote back saying it was okay and to pass his regrets over the crime to Natruk.

It was hard being so many miles away from problems he usually would have helped solving: Tommy's misery, the strained relationship between humans and goblins...

Sunday began just as early as every other day. Since most of his friends decided to sleep in, Harry used that morning to deliver his message to Kertak.

Knowing that Hedwig would never accept another owl as a messenger, he went to Trinky asking her how exactly he'd received the notebook. She was being very elusive and Harry saw for the first time that house-elves' magic too had its secrets, like the wand-carriers unwilling to give away the secrets of wand-making. However, Trinky was more than happy to have the notebook brought to Kertak. When he asked what he could do in return, she'd merely smiled and said that this was 'a friend's favour.'

It was good to see how much more confident she was around him than she had been at the beginning. Especially if one considered that they'd only met a week ago.

Currently, Harry was struggling with his own confidence. Yesterday's talk with Hagrid was the cause of it.

He wanted to talk to the deputy headmistress. She was a kind woman, he was sure of that, but he wasn't sure how well she would take a student not belonging to her House to stand in front of her office at eight o'clock on a Sunday morning.

He took a deep breath and knocked at the door.

"Mr Potter, good morning," the witch said in bewilderment after opening her door, "May I help you?"

"I'd like to talk to you, Professor... If that were possible," he added after a moment's contemplation.

She looked worried when she said, "Of course. Please come in, Mr Potter. Sit down."

Once inside, Harry sat down on the other side of her desk. This wasn't the same as his talk with Hagrid. The wizard was easy to talk to, unlike his Transfiguration teacher.

Professor McGonagall made him feel like the headmistress of his the school he'd attended after coming to St Mary's. She'd been very stern with a heart of gold as well, and whenever he'd been sent to her office he had the feeling of having done something wrong, even if he hadn't.

"What leads you to me, Mr Potter?"

"Hagrid," he answered promptly and explained further, "I was talking to Hagrid yesterday about... My parents. And he told me you knew them. Could you... I'd like to hear more about them."

Every student attending this school knew she was always composed and reasonable. Everybody who knew her was aware she was a rather emotional being. For a short moment, her serene mask slipped, but Professor McGonagall had herself under control before the boy in front of her noticed...

"I'm sorry," the young child said regretfully, "I didn't mean to rip open old wounds, Professor."

... And maybe, Lily's and James' son was more perceptive than she'd like to think.

"You were their Head of House and therefore their caretaker for seven years, give or take the weeks they spent at home," Mr Potter continued, "Sister Augustine, my guardian..." He stumbled over the word. And she had no troubles seeing why.

Legally, Sister Augustine was his guardian, but because until a month ago there had been no birth certificate or any other official paper, guardianship had never been removed from Petunia Evans. Currently, Albus and herself were doing their best to gain papers that would prove Harry's existence. In the Muggle World as well as the Wizarding World.

She wondered how much Harry knew. They would've have sat down together anyhow, along with Pomona in a few week's time to clarify all this, but some things could already be said today.

"She once said that no matter how many times she'd already had to do it, saying goodbye to her charges was always painful. It must have been hard when you were informed of their deaths."

Tears filled her eyes, when the young orphan in front of her gave her his condolences over his parents' own death.

For the first time, she allowed herself to feel wistful over the fact he belonged to Pomona's house.

Anyhow, he was the son of people she'd cared for deeply. He would always belong to her, whether he was a lion or a badger.

"It was, Mr Potter. They were both very dear to me, but of all people it was you who suffered the most from their deaths," she replied, a bit unsure what to say.

He paused for a moment at her words, before saying seriously, "I know someone whose mother died on his tenth birthday, Professor. Growing up as an orphan seems cruel to most people, but you can't

miss what you never had. You can only long for it. I think it's harder to lose something you actually remember having."

She did her best to avoid it, but blinking wasn't enough to keep her eyes from moistening. And the emerald orbs in front of her didn't help.

"Oh..." Realization dawned. Professor McGonagall could see it. The boy wore the same expression Lily had, when seeing something she hadn't noticed before. James had rarely worn a similar expression in her class because Transfiguration had come as naturally to him as breathing to others. And out of class, when he became conscious of a matter he hadn't thought of before, it had only been a small candle lit in hazel eyes. Mother and son on the other hand... Their eyes burned, "You lost someone. Of course, you did. The Wizarding world was at war. War always claims people."

Shocked, she looked at the boy. How did he know this? Lily's and James' death had hurt, but he wasn't talking about that. He somehow knew she'd lost her little sister Meditрина. She was sure he knew.

All of a sudden, the eye-contact was cut off and she felt herself relax. When they looked at each other again, Harry's eyes weren't as piercing anymore, "I apologize. Professor McGonagall, I have no intention of stealing your time. It is your decision whether or not to tell me about my parents. You may tell me time and place and I'll be there."

"Unless you have plans, Mr Potter," the Transfiguration said softly, "I would tell you a thing or two. Not everything, mind you, because I don't think it wise for either of us to summarize a decade at once."

Harry didn't say anything, but his face spoke volumes. Not ready to let silence settle in between them, she began, "I was not acquainted with the Potter family. Your father's parents went to school before my years. So, I met your father at school when I awaited them not unlike I awaited your arrival a week ago. Your mother I met before since she was a Muggleborn and therefore had to be introduced into Wizarding Society by the deputy headmistress as it is tradition. Usually, that is. You were an exception since you aren't technically Muggleborn." Again, she was being regarded with an intense look,

but this was different... Something in the air changed and Harry's eyes widened slightly.

"Lady?" he whispered. Her heart skipped a beat. He hadn't reacted to her much; neither when she'd picked them up nor in class. But she hadn't been inspected back then as she was now. "You were... How's your hip, Professor? Tommy was feeling awful over hurting you."

She'd met Severus in the staff room the day before yesterday after the detention he'd assigned to Harry, and she'd had the impression that he was a bit unsettled, though he hadn't said a single word. It was just that usually their chess games ended in a tie. That evening, Severus hadn't won a single game before excusing himself.

All of a sudden, she could relate with her younger colleague.

"I'm well, Mr Potter. You recognize Animagi? Witches and wizards turning into animals," she added when she noticed the first year's puzzled look.

"I... No. I mean, I didn't know you were human when I saw you; surely there was something odd about that cat, but nothing tangible. You just seemed to have a better understanding than animals in general... I guess I notice when things are off. I'm good at recognizing liars, but I'm better at recognizing people who actively try to keep things from me. So, you can turn into animals?" there was a quiet exclamation of a typical eleven-year-old in awe. It calmed her significantly after marvelling his statement of feeling when things were 'off.' She'd have to talk to Albus about this.

"Just the one, the form you saw..." she said, "I'd be glad if this wasn't discussed too openly in the Hufflepuff Common Room, Mr Potter. Animagi are being discussed in third year and I usually demonstrate this form in the first lesson." What she received, was an amused smile.

"Of course, Professor. So, you went to see my mother. Did you tell her she was a witch? How did she react?"

"It wasn't me who told her. Not unlike you, she found a friend from the Magical World before turning eleven. They attended Hogwarts together." She had no idea why keeping secrets from the boy in

front of her was so infinitely harder than when it came to other students. At least, she hadn't mentioned the name.

Harry's green eyes lit up at that, "Do you think he or she would be ready to talk to me one of these days?"

Sadly, she shook her head, "I don't think it very wise, Mr Potter. They stopped being friends when they were fifteen." She would talk to Severus, though. After all, he'd known Lily well, but she wasn't ready to subject a, however mature, child to Severus over this particularly painful issue.

She saw the boy's eyes furrow.

"Mr Potter?"

"I don't understand them!" he exclaimed all of a sudden, "Friends are for life! You don't betray them. You stick to them. If they screw up, you stand by their side slamming their heads against a wall if necessary, but you don't just stop being friends. You don't give up." Fierce eyes pierced into hers.

"Whom don't you understand?" she asked for clarification.

Harry didn't answer; he apologized politely for his outburst and asked her to continue. She wasn't deterred and repeated her question. Again, she had the feeling of being exposed when their gazes met.

"They're not all like this," Harry began, "I've met some very kind people and I already like to call them my friends, but... Kids from normal, conventional families don't seem to view friends the same way I do. Every orphan I know, stands for a family broken, torn apart or dead, so all I know about that kind of family is that they're not necessarily meant to last. Friends are whom you choose, you don't choose lightly and it's supposed to last for the rest of your life. For them it's the other way around and I don't get it."

Minerva McGonagall froze in her seat.

'Every orphan I know stands for a family broken, torn apart or dead, so all I know about that kind of family is that they're not necessarily meant to last.'

She remembered one of her peers stating something almost identical. He'd been fifteen; she'd only been a Third Year.

It relieved her profoundly that the two boys' opinion on friendship varied so greatly.

'Family bonds are easily broken, Minerva. Death, abandonment... I've seen it all. Families don't have to last and where I'm from, the children say that friends are family. What does that tell you about the liability of friendship? So, no, Minerva. I'm not interested.'

She'd never revealed that conversation to anybody. Too great had been the hurt, too embarrassed she'd been for asking that attractive wizard to become her friend only to be turned down.

These days, the humiliation, though still making her feel like that adolescent girl she'd been, was bearable, but shame kept her from telling. Who knew what would have happened had he accepted her offer.

"Are you alright, Professor?" a young voice brought her back to the present.

"Family ties can be very strong, Mr Potter," she began, still feeling a bit distracted.

"I know that," was the soft reply, "Siblings who lost their parents are inseparable for they're all they have and I understand that. I'm simply under the impression that these ties kind of devalue the meaning of friendship."

"I'm sure you've heard that 'Blood is thicker than water,' Mr Potter. But do not mistake water for friendship. You cannot compare family and friends. They're not the same."

Defeated, he hung his head, watching his knees, "I see. It's just that they are to me." She'd expected tears in the little boy's face when he looked at her again after a while. She was surprised to see him smile.

And she was struck again.

Lily and James. The boy in front of her was their legacy. For the first time, she saw them both in equal measure.

James' jaw, James's smile when he was alone with his friends. When he was not trying to impress a girl. Boyish, genuine.

Combined with happily blazing green.

"I guess, it's good I'm here," Harry said, once again bringing her back to reality, "You're telling me something about my family. Maybe, that'll help my confusion."

She managed, just barely, not to return that mischievous smile. She was aware that the issue was far from solved, but right now he wanted answers to questions he'd been asking himself for a very long time.

"Where were we?" she asked, before recalling, "Ah yes! Muggleborns are usually escorted to Diagon Alley when visiting it for the first time, but Eile... Your mother's friend I've mentioned before accompanied her along with his mother." A sharp look told the deputy headmistress that she'd just betrayed the gender of Lily's friend, "So, I truly met them for the first time when they were in my classroom. Your father was a natural. He turned the match into a needle by the end of their first lesson. He was the best of his year and after attending his fifth year at Hogwarts, he was the best Transfiguration student of the entire school, only equalled by Siri..." Too late, she stopped. It pained her to know what would come next. The questions... The following pain... The anger...

Strangely, the pain came first, "Sirius Black. Yes, I know. You don't have to tiptoe around him. The feelings might not have been reciprocated," the flatness in that young boy's tone chilled her, "But if my Dad was anything like me, he'll have thought of him as a brother. Therefore it's impossible to cut Black out from those memories; he'll have been present at every minor and major aspect of my father's life... It's okay, Professor. Please, just tell me."

She already knew who'd be winning the chess game after lunch. He wouldn't gloat, though. He'd understand. However, he might remind her of that Quidditch trophy constantly standing in his office for the last seven years.

"Your father and his friends were, well, troublemakers. I've seen you talk to the Weasley twins; they might give you a good idea."

They'd driven her crazy on a regular basis and she was still convinced that the Weasleys hadn't managed to receive quite as many detentions just yet. And that had only been punishment for the mischief she'd discovered.

Sirius Black's and James Potter's actions hadn't always been benevolent. A particularly strenuous time had been by the end of their fifth year when Sirius had received knowledge he wouldn't be allowed to return home that summer.

A disgrace to the Black name. An outcast, removed from the family tree. She'd never forget the day when that confident, often arrogant boy, had broken into tears for having lost a family he'd never truly felt comfortable in.

But, Merlin, they'd received detention for the rest of their fifth year after she'd been informed of their behaviour towards Severus. Every student with the exception of Lily had received detention. For not stepping in.

She remembered James' miserable expression in the face of her profound disappointment. Such an event never occurred again, not to her knowledge at least. Seeing where Sirius Black currently was made her doubt her observation skills, though.

"So, they were adept, intelligent, jokers and, judging by what I've seen so far, wealthy..." Harry summarized quietly, and then sighed, "They weren't exactly modest, were they?"

Minerva didn't know whether to laugh or look sad when shaking her head, "No, one could not say this about your father and his best friend. Remus Lupin managed to keep them from acting too foolishly though. Sometimes," she added truthfully.

"Do you think we could have been friends?" hopeful vulnerability filled emerald eyes, but they were asking for nothing but the truth.

She thought of how Harry's maturity would have clashed with their silliness and how their completely different backgrounds would have created certain barriers of understanding. At the same time, she

remembered Harry spiritedly talking to Blaise Zabini whose home was comparable to James' and of Theodore Nott whose home was difficult not unlike Sirius Black's...

"I think you might have 'slammed their heads against a wall' more often than not, you would have been forced to keep their foolishness under control, but I think you could have been friends."

What she received was a genuine, bright smile with eyes blazing in amusement.

"Your mother and you would have gotten along very well," she stated truthfully.

"That bad?" Harry smirked, and elucidated when recognizing her confusion, "I'd have wanted to kick my father's a...butt that severely?"

For the first time she heard a slip. Reminding her like a splash of water in her face that the boy in front of her had experienced a profoundly different childhood from his parents.

She remembered how her hands had shaken in fury and despair, the public records she'd been holding in her hands had burst into flames. Severus hadn't even commented on her lack of control, simply asked her if she had an idea how to put Sullivan behind the bars of Azkaban.

This was the wrong moment to approach Harry on this.

Briefly she wondered if there would ever be a right time.

"I'm afraid, yes, Mr Potter. Your father was a good man, especially when he left adolescence behind, but..." she sighed forcing her swirling thoughts to focus back on the conversation taking place, "You'd have often scolded him."

Harry only smiled, oblivious to her inner turmoil, "Scold... Well, I guess I do that every once in a while," he admitted after a moment of reflection. His face grew serious a moment later, "Are you feeling alright, Professor?"

How did he do this? Students normally couldn't read her that easily.

"Quite alright. No need for you to be concerned."

The lifted eyebrows told her how clearly he saw through her lie, but he didn't comment on it.

"Your mother was reasonably gifted with Transfiguration, but Charms and Potions were her passion. She excelled in them. Fil... Professor Flitwick will be able to tell you more about the former. If you're interested." She was quite sure that Filius was already very fond of Harry. He hadn't said much, but his heritage wasn't exactly a secret and she'd very well taken notice of the discussion between Pomona, Filius and Albus concerning History of Magic.

She'd promised Filius to provide the drinks should they finally receive a replacement for the old history teacher.

"But while I've been your mother's Head of House, we became friends after she completed her education at Hogwarts. She was exceedingly bright and kind-hearted, but I have the feeling you know that already." And he didn't want to hear general pleasantries for despite his age, he was far too knowledgeable with life to be satisfied with empty talk of a person's goodness, "She was stubborn. In all my life, I've hardly met anybody as stubborn as her." Unable to keep the fondness out of her voice, she continued, "One might even called her pig-headed. Your father might have caused mayhem on a regular basis at this school, but nobody dared to cross Lily Evans' path when fury overcame her. No one but your father." Harry's smirk made her smile in return, "I do not know how well you are acquainted with Muggle literature, but Elizabeth Bennett and Fitzwilliam Darcy might give you fair idea of how their relationship started and progressed."

"He refused to dance with her?" Harry asked with his eyebrows raised.

"Oh no, but he caught her off the wrong foot and having found their equal they would often fight and banter with each other. Though given by the idiocy of your father in the face of Lily Evans I will never understand how it could take her so long to realize his intentions."

"One of the older kids at home once said that we're all daft when it comes to love. It doesn't surprise me, therefore," was the amused

reply. Green eyes were fixed on her, and she saw that he had no intention of ever letting this conversation come to an end.

Eagerness brightened the severe face and for a moment, he looked appropriate his age and her wish to protect the little, far too little, boy in front of her consumed her.

"Were you at their wedding?"

"Yes, your mother gave me the honour to be her bridesmaid along with Petunia, whom I admittedly didn't know very well," she added quickly at seeing Harry's curiosity peaked once more, "If you want to, I could provide you with some photographs of that wonderful day."

"Thank you," Harry whispered breathlessly, "I'd love to see them."

When silence settled down between them, not companionable but not uncomfortable silence either, Minerva decided to speak of another matter important to her, "Mr Potter, I don't know how well exactly you are acquainted with Muggle and wizard law... See, your case is complex..."

"... Since there is no name, no family, no proof of my existence," Harry spoke almost monotonously and it ached her to see his carefully placed indifference, "The government officially knows of my existence since January fourth, 1991. My temporary guardian is Sister Augustine, I'm registered as Harry Doe until further intelligence is found, which usually doesn't happen. I'm allowed to change my name when I turn eighteen.... Or when a birth certificate or other papers happen to show up."

She noticed his reluctance, or rather refusal, to speak of what happened before January 1991. It was as if nine years of his life were simply nonexistent. She would not ask him, not alone, without his Head of House present, but, Merlin, she wanted to.

"You've proven to be the last of the Potter family when you received the invitation letter to Hogwarts as well as when you opened the vault at Gringotts, Mr Potter. Therefore, the Wizarding World should acknowledge your identity rather soon. As for the Muggle World, the headmaster and I are currently trying to get hold off the papers, which is difficult since the originals were most likely destroyed in that fire all those years ago." She saw his eyes widen and all blood

seemed to drain from his face. Before she could do, or say, anything however, he visibly relaxed as if thinking of something else than the terror engulfing him an instant earlier, "Also, the fact you were proclaimed dead in both worlds will also complicate matters, but that is not for you to worry about. All shall be settled in a few months' time, I merely intended to give you a head's up before this matter will, undoubtedly, be discussed with Professor Sprout, the headmaster, myself and you."

She saw the expression change in the mature boy's face.

She could see that by accepting him as an equal, or at least seeing him as someone fit and mature enough to receive knowledge of complicated matters such as legal custody, she'd just risen considerably in his respects. And it filled her with silent joy. His solemn nod settled something. She wasn't sure what, but something told her that it might be easy to be met with politeness, even a strange sort of initial trust she'd never witnessed in a self-reliant orphan before, but to be respected by him, as an adult, was not a level to reach lightly. And it came with responsibility.

She would not let him down.

Just in time, Harry arrived at the Infirmary in order to help Madame Pomfrey.

He'd spent a good part of the day pondering on his meeting with the Transfiguration teacher. Professor McGonagall had been surprisingly frank with him, had treated him with respect and she'd received his in return.

He wasn't a fool. She knew something. Though he couldn't say what it was, he knew it had to do with Hell. She'd been at St Mary's, she had been bound to hear more, but it still worried him. How much did the Hogwarts staff know?

Professors Flitwick and Sprout didn't know anything, he was quite sure of that. The headmaster and the deputy headmistress seemed to know however little.

Professor Snape was a special case. He understood many aspects of Harry's character, but he wasn't as obviously horrified as Professor McGonagall. The Potions Master knew there had been

tough times in Harry's childhood, but he didn't seem to know of Hell. His demeanour was too cool for that.

"Good evening, Mr Potter," Madame Pomfrey said, and it calmed him to realize that she was clueless. The last thing he wanted was a physical examination.

Oh, all his wounds had healed long ago, but enough scars remained to render a guess concerning his past.

He'd hidden back then, of course, but something told him that a mediwitch was not as easily fooled as a human doctor and it was best not to take chances.

"Good evening, Madame Pomfrey," he replied with a smile.

They didn't linger long for idle conversation. Briefly, the matron explained to him what was part of the inventory.

They were to count the medical supplies such as bandages, the potions, then general inventory for instance counting the number of sheets at Madame Pomfrey's disposal. Each list was to be written down on different sheets of parchment.

"The medical supplies I'm able to gather from St Mungo's," she explained, looking down at Harry. She'd decided that it was best if he'd just walk with her for today, next week she would let him count the general inventory, "I'm placing an order and ... Do you know St Mungo's, Mr Potter?"

"St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries," he replied. Kertak had told him about the wizarding hospital, not much, but he knew it existed, "I've heard of it, but I've neither been there nor have I ever visited anybody that did. What I know is rather little, therefore."

The most interesting part of the inventory was the assessment of the potions supply. The potions were all placed in what seemed to be a storage room and Harry asked what each potion was called. More than two third of them he'd never heard of and he quickly registered them to read up on those.

At some point, he noticed something. Each label had been written by the same hand and it was not Madame Pomfrey's. His suspicions were confirmed when he noticed that next to the date of brewing, there was a small signature, 'brewed by SS, roMiP 7th September 1981, MMP 1983.'

"You do not receive your potions from St Mungo's, do you?" Harry stated, rather than asked, "What does 'roMiP' and 'MMP' mean?"

"'Receiver of Mastery in Potions' and 'Master for Medical Potions,'" She replied, "Professor Snape is required to write down the date of receiving either of those diplomas for every single medical potion he's brewed." She explained having very well noticed that Harry was aware who was brewing for this Infirmary.

When this last list was finished, Madame Pomfrey took it and brought it into her office. Harry cherished the small room. It was tidy and ordered, but the amount of medical books covering the shelf was impressive and gave the chamber the impression of being stocked too well, yet not enough to make Harry feel claustrophobic. There was also a window large enough for Harry to climb out if necessary and that was enough for him to like it.

"Professor Snape and I discuss every Sunday what potions have to be restored or even replaced due to the fact some of them lose their healing power or increase their toxicity with time," she was about to explain when loud, agitated chatter interrupted them. Immediately, the matron made her way towards the students who'd just entered the Infirmary.

"Madame Pomfrey! Please, come quick!" a young voice called her anxiously. Quicker than the matron was able to react, Harry was already near the entrance of the Infirmary.

His heart was beating fast. He'd recognized the voice.

A/N: Since I really have to go to sleep but wanted to post another chapter tonight, the length of my author's note suffered. I'll keep it short.

As always: THANK YOU, especially the multiple reviewers of the last chapter. And the numerous story alerts. They make me happy :)

And another important note: The conversation between Harry and Minerva McGonagall is dedicated to my Beta Miss Goalie75 for it was inspired by several conversations I had with her on the topic. Among other things why canon!Harry never tried to find out more about his past. Thanks, MissGoalie! You're great.

Chapter 11, Part One: Down to Earth, Up in the Air

'Hermione,' he thought anxiously.

She wasn't hurt; he knew that since her voice wasn't filled with pain, but she sounded worried.

Quickly stepping into the part of the Infirmary providing patients' care, he surveyed the situation with far too experienced eyes. Blaise and Ron were carrying Neville's unconscious body.

He didn't ask.

He never asked. He simply took the last few steps that divided him from his friends and silently directed Blaise and Ron to lay the lifeless boy onto a bed nearby. He made sure Neville's neck was stabilized in the process.

As he heard the matron entering, he started to say, "Let's take a step back. Give Madame Pomfrey some space." Neither of the two boys resisted as he gently led them away. Ron looked ashen; Blaise's face had lost some colour as well, his normally humorous and expressive dark-brown eyes were wide and blank as if in shock.

Harry took one look at Madame Pomfrey tending to his friend and he knew Neville was in good hands. He recognized professionals when he saw them and the quick but secure administrations and wand movements were, though he didn't understand them well, enough for Harry to know that he'd hinder the mediwitch rather than help her should he decide to lend a hand. Therefore, it was wise to step away.

Handing over responsibilities like this never came easy to him, however.

His attentions shifted when he heard a quiet sob.

"Hermione," he whispered quietly, overcoming the space between them. Without another word, he carefully laid a hand on her shoulder and squeezed it affectionately. They didn't know each other well enough for Harry to console her with an embrace. However, the girl didn't seem to share that particular sentiment. A second later, he had her sobbing in his arms.

"He's going to be okay, don't worry," Harry whispered soothingly and carefully led the distressed girl out of the Infirmary, gesturing Blaise and Ron to follow them.

Neville was unconscious, that alone was enough for the young orphan to be more than a little concerned. He had no desire to leave the room.

But healing required focus and Madame Pomfrey was more experienced than he was. It was best to remove all distractions and, once outside, he would be able to do something, such as helping his uninjured friends to calm down.

"What happened?" he finally asked.

All he received first was a sob from Hermione. It was Blaise who spoke up, his face grim.

"Peeves," he said.

Harry furrowed his eyebrows. He'd heard the name before, but he simply couldn't recall in what context. Was it a student?

"It's the poltergeist of Hogwarts," Blaise explained when he saw Harry's questioning look, "He's a menace, but he doesn't hurt students. It was an accident. He startled us when we were climbing upstairs. Neville was caught up in one of those steps that happen to disappear sometimes and..." He stopped talking, but there were no further words needed.

The spirit of chaos, kranàul, as they were called in Gobbledegock... He had been unaware that such a creature existed within the walls of this castle, but, well, he'd only heard of them by Kertak, never met one.

The poltergeist was responsible for the motionless body of his friend. Oh, he hadn't pushed him downstairs, but he was responsible for his fall.

"Peeves went to fetch the headmaster," Blaise continued, "He looked as if he was about to cry, really. I doubt he wanted to hurt Neville. He's been part of the castle forever and I think that hurting students is unacceptable. He's annoying as hell, yes, but he doesn't

hurt us students deliberately..." His words trailed off and he was silent again.

Looking back to this conversation, Harry was glad for Blaise's insight. Had Blaise given the slightest impression that Peeves' intentions had been malicious, or anything else but accidental, Harry would have done something he would've regretted in later years.

A threat for a threat.

But when the damage was done, that was another matter entirely. It was important not to lose focus, though, not to lash out before you know exactly what happened.

That could be unbearably hard sometimes.

He'd promised to himself the day they'd left Hell that he would never let his friends be hurt by anybody ever again. That involved chaotic spirits that should know better than scaring children on an instable staircase. However, if it was only an accident, Harry would restrain from any sort of action he loathed to do in the first place.

He would be confronting Peeves, however, whether Professor Dumbledore decided to deal with the poltergeist or not.

"Where's Millicent?" he asked while intently listening to what was happening behind the closed doors of the Infirmary. He didn't hear anything.

"She went to inform Professor Snape and then Professor McGonagall," at Ron's derisive huff, who had heard more than just one bad story about the Potions Master from his brothers and other members of the Gryffindor House, Blaise continued sternly, "He told us to go to him personally, should we see a friend in trouble. Unless we run into a prefect first. So, that's what we do."

The fierce loyalty Slytherins seemed to feel for their House and its Head, almost immediately after being sorted, was something Harry could relate to very well.

While Hufflepuffs were friendly in general and loyal to each other, they were also open-hearted with members of other Houses.

Slytherin was a very tight group, though. His encounter with Flint and his friends had taught Harry this much about the House's dynamics, no matter how bad the example. They didn't think much of outsiders.

In a way, Hufflepuff, Gryffindor and Ravenclaw seemed to be 'Others' to Slytherin. Harry wondered just how much of this isolation was done voluntarily. He knew from experience that isolation such as this was often nothing more than self-preservation. Maybe, the little group they'd formed while finding their way to Hogwarts would change this narrow point of view a little bit.

'Hypocrite!' he scolded himself. He'd hardly ever talked to, not to mention interacted with an Other before coming to Hogwarts.

A soft moan brought him out of his reveries. He wanted to quietly sneak back into the Infirmary to see what was going on. Harry wordlessly informed Blaise that he would go take a look while the other boy took care of Hermione. At least, Char would've interpreted his actions as such.

The Slytherin would have followed him, hadn't Harry lifted his right hand in a clear motion. He received a frown that quickly turned into a scowl, which took Harry slightly aback. But the moan was heard again and he slipped through the doorway in one fluid motion without examining the other boy's reaction any further.

Neville was awake and, to Harry's great relief, he didn't look pained, just a little disoriented.

"How's he?" he asked while longing to check for himself. He couldn't remember a time when a hurt friend hadn't been examined by him thoroughly; he was being 'bloody tedious' about that as Char confirmed when it wasn't anything serious.

Oh, he could remember times, but those times were the reason why he could hardly stand not to do anything.

"He's going to be fine, Mr Potter," Madame Pomfrey said, "You may examine him. Like this, I'll see what you already know."

Sharply, Harry caught her eyes. Was he that obvious? Or did she truly want nothing more than estimate his knowledge?

Before he started the examination, he looked at Blaise who'd quietly followed him and was again surprised to see his eyes rolling exasperatedly at Harry's encouraging nod.

Didn't he get just how...?

Of course he didn't. They'd known each other for a week. He couldn't expect Blaise to understand his actions or the significance behind them.

He'd resolve that issue later, though. Neville had priority.

Methodically, Harry checked his pulse, his breathing pattern, checked his eyes, more specifically his pupils, while talking to him quietly to check whether he was coherent.

"How are you feeling?" he asked softly.

"A bit drowsy," the boy answered even more quietly.

"Does anything hurt?"

He received a shake of the head this time, allowing him to check the neck a little bit better. Carefully, Harry checked the boy's limbs for broken bones with special attention to the wrists, but he couldn't feel anything.

Something was strange, though.

"How come he doesn't have the slightest cuts or bruises?" this question was meant for Madame Pomfrey. Harry had seen the cuts in Neville's face. And he'd been sure there would be bruises.

"A very basic Healing Charm, Mr Potter. I'll be telling you more about them in due time."

Harry's eyes widened. She could make injuries like this disappear? Just like that? That was unheard of. Mending broken bones was one thing, but to heal in a way it didn't leave the slightest mark was astounding.

Having finished his short examination, he smiled at his friend, "You're going to be okay. You don't have any broken bones, your head's clear and you don't seem to be losing any blood. I guess you should stay here for tonight, though. To make sure there won't be any complications."

At Madame Pomfrey's satisfied smile and confirming nod, Harry couldn't help but feel his smile widen a bit.

He wanted to add something when noises outside of the Infirmary caught his attention.

"Nev!" a panicked, young voice called from the doorway. A second later, the Boy Who Lived rushed into the Infirmary. He exclaimed frantically, "Merlin! I knew something happened! How're you feeling?"

The unconcealed concern displayed in Laci's face made Harry swallow hard. Laci may be treating his brother rather harshly, but this was evidence that the Boy Who Lived cared for Neville deeply. Neville's lack of hesitation when grabbing his twin's hand also proved that this wasn't merely for show in front of strangers.

They might not be Fred and George, but they were twins and there was a bond, for once in plain sight.

Neville gave the same answer he'd given Harry and added, "I'm fine, Laci. Don't worry." The ghost of a smile became visible and Harry had to smirk a little.

He immediately tensed when he sensed the arrival of several adults, approaching him from behind. He turned around warily and saw that there were Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape. Millicent was right behind them. And further into the shadows, Harry saw something move.

His eyes narrowed trying to pick up who that was. It was out of his range before he could identify the presence any further. He had a feeling who it could be, though, since the headmaster was here.

Blaise, Ron, Neville, Hermione, Laci and Harry said their respectful greetings to their teachers and Hogwarts' headmaster.

Millicent moved past Professor McGonagall and pulled her cousin into a hug. It was impossible to tell who was comforting whom.

Lacius spoke first, "My brother is badly hurt because of some spook floating around this castle, Professor Dumbledore. What do you intend to do about Peeves?" The hardness in the other boy's eyes told them rather plainly that the poltergeist should be banished from this castle immediately. Harry agreed quite readily, although he'd prefer talking to him, first.

"Mr Longbottom, I do understand that you are upset. Peeves has told me, truthfully, what happened. It was an accident, his intent was to scare and annoy your brother, not to harm him. It will never happen again, he gave me his word. Peeves has been a part of this castle for more than a thousand years, Mr Longbottom. To banish him from this place would most likely result in his peril," the headmaster explained calmly. He seemed to have caught up on the Boy Who Lived's tone as well.

"I don't care," Lacius shot back angrily, "He hurt my brother!"

'And you don't hurt him by demeaning him at all,' Harry thought irritably.

Lacius noticed the orphan's expression and shouted, "What is your problem? What are you doing here in the first place?"

All eyes were on him in an instant. He could bear the kids' looks, but having received the attention of four adults at once, never matter that either of them had hurt him so far, made him cringe inwardly.

However, he wouldn't be intimidated by the Boy Who Lived, "As far as I remember, I didn't tell you my name willingly, so what makes you possibly think I'm going to answer a question over a matter that is none of your business?" his voice was calm, his posture seemingly relaxed. In reality, he was tense, but that wasn't for Lacius to know.

Lacius gritted his teeth before he straightened his back and lifted his chin lightly.

His stance screamed quite plainly, 'You're unworthy of my intention.' Then he turned his entire body to give his attentions back to

Professor Dumbledore, while offering his back to Harry. Said boy had to give it to him. Laciur Longbottom definitely knew how to display contempt without saying it out loud.

"What is going to happen to that spook?" it seemed as if the Boy Who Lived suddenly thought it better to ask than to demand.

"He has already been punished, Mr Longbottom," Professor Dumbledore explained calmly, "This castle, Laciur," the words were spoken with tender respect, "Is much more than mere bricks built upon each other. It is, quite frankly, alive. The ghosts feel its presence rather powerfully. Peeves included. It is Hogwarts' sacred duty to protect its students. He hurt one of them, which is why he has been deeply wounded."

"How? What could a castle possibly do?" Laciur hissed disdainfully.

"It withdrew its presence from Peeves' consciousness. Completely. Keep in mind that Peeves looks upon this castle as home, family, parent even, and now, to him, it's gone."

Harry stiffened.

Abandonment.

A topic he was all too familiar with. A topic he despised. Too many tears were associated with that heartless action. And heartless it was. Nobody could be telling him that it was wise to willingly leave those you cared for.

The horrifying realization of having done just that by going to Hogwarts almost choked him. Desperately trying to hold onto something, he grabbed the wooden outline of the hospital bed Neville was lying in.

He immediately let go when he noticed the air change. He quietly retreated, using the walls made of stone once more to channel his inner calm.

His actions earned a very intense look from the headmaster, and, for only a moment, Harry saw within the benevolent blue eyes the power that elderly body contained. He had the urge to disappear, to

be seen no more, but he knew that the powerful wizard would notice his attempt.

It had been long ago since he'd last felt so helpless.

Thankfully, Professor Dumbledore seemed to have observed his uneasiness and turned back to look at the Boy Who Lived, "I know it's hard to understand, but Peeves is hurting very much from the accident he caused, unwillingly I might add."

At Laciuss' derisive snort and Neville's dismay, Harry knew with perfect clarity that the twins' lives, though having grown up in the same household, varied from each other significantly. He'd actually seen it before, that day at King's Cross, but the fact Neville understood while Laciuss didn't, gave him this last piece of evidence he'd needed.

His heart ached for the timid boy, while his earlier felt respect for the other, far less timid, underage wizard started to evaporate rather quickly.

"Oh, how terrible," Laciuss stated sarcastically, "Mummy and Daddy don't love poor, little Peeves anymore."

'Why don't they want me?' Gabriel's sobs were so intense, he was shuddering uncontrollably, 'What is wrong with me?'

'They didn't love me,' Alex said dismissively, but the lost look in her eyes betrayed her. Part of her would always be that little girl watching them leave without comprehending what was happening, 'Their mistake.'

Dozens of other scenes were crushing down on Harry the moment Laciuss' thoughtless, cynical words left his mouth.

"Enough," the Potions Master chimed in sharply, "Mr Longbottom, your concern for your brother is duly noted, but it is not up to you to decide what will happen to the culprit. If the headmaster tells you that the situation has been taken care of, you are to believe him. Stop this foolish behaviour this instant."

What Professor Snape received in return of his words was a look of unconcealed contempt. Laciuss looked at the tall man coolly, before

he turned to Professor Dumbledore, "My parents will be informed of this incident." Then he muttered, more to himself than for anyone else's ears, "Lucius was right about you."

It was Madame Pomfrey's turn to interrupt them.

"Headmaster, Professors, Mr Longbottom," she said sternly, "This is a hospital wing. If you are to argue, you might as well do this in the office of a staff member. Mr Longbottom needs his rest and therefore I must ask you to leave. All of you. Mr Potter, thank you very much for your help. Please, come here after your classes tomorrow, there are a few things I'd like to discuss with you."

Harry despised that phrase coming from an adult, nothing good ever came out of the professional tone.

She seemed to sense his tension and amended, "Your help at the Infirmary is appreciated, Harry."

She obviously wanted them to converse in privacy, but the orphan felt both embarrassed and grateful due to her calming words. Grateful for the assurance, embarrassed because he needed it and, worse even, because she'd noticed it. These past few days full of new experiences had exhausted him emotionally. He'd have to regain control and he had to do it soon.

As teachers and students alike started to leave the hospital wing, the kids patted Neville's shoulder, squeezed it or, in Hermione's case, carefully hugged him, and spoke reassuring words for his upcoming recovery.

Last to leave was Lucius. Once again witnessing the brotherly tenderness between them made it incredibly hard for Harry to despise the arrogant boy whole-heartedly. He didn't like him for several reasons, but that feeling was mutual anyway.

"Headmaster," Professor Snape quietly addressed the eldest wizard nearby, "With your permission, I would like to bring the members of my house back to their dorm. Mr Potter can come with us."

"Certainly," the older man replied, "Lucius..."

"Have a nice evening, Professors," the Boy Who Lived replied. It was remarkable how those words sounded more among the lines of, 'I'd prefer you being the ones falling downstairs the same way my brother had to.'

He didn't even glance at his contemporaries and left.

Snape's eyes blazed with annoyance, "Longbot..." But a commanding, firm hand by the older wizard stopped him. The younger man's irritation was still apparent, but as Harry had not wanted to question Snape's authority in his classroom, the Potions Master was unwilling to challenge the headmaster.

Professor McGonagall looked no less appalled at Laci's behaviour than her younger colleague, but she got herself a grip rather quickly. She turned to face her students, "You've all done some very quick thinking, Miss Bulstrode, Miss Granger, Mr Weasley, Mr Zabini. You've acted quickly and correctly when faced with a frightening situation without an older student present. I think ten points for both Slytherin and Gryffindor should be sufficient." She then looked at Harry, "May I ask just exactly in what way you're involved with Mr Longbottom's rescue?"

"I was here at the Infirmary when Neville was brought here," Harry answered truthfully.

"I see. Pop... Madame Pomfrey did say you were helping out. Therefore, it is her choice whether or not to give you points. Thank you for your assistance, however." That said, she turned to Ron and Hermione, "I think it is best if you go back to your dormitories. I will accompany you for I'd like to have a word with Mr Longbottom."

When it was time for the Gryffindors to take a turn towards their tower, Ron and Hermione wished their goodnights and the two girls embraced each other.

Their walk downstairs was quiet until Millicent focused on the orphan, "Why were you helping Madame Pomfrey?"

"I'm interested in healing, especially critical care," Harry answered, "I was invited to join her when she was doing her inventory. She wants me to learn the basics before she teaches me anything."

"Have you done it before?" Blaise asked suddenly. He was still irritated, but his curiosity was seemingly more powerful than annoyance.

The other boy glanced at him before his eyes flickered towards Professor Snape who was walking ahead of them, apparently unaware of their conversation. Nothing could be farther from the truth, though.

"Yes," he stated simply. He didn't want to have this kind of conversation here. Thankfully, Blaise noticed for he didn't ask anything else. The irritation was back, even stronger than before.

"Mr Potter," the Potions teacher let himself be known, "You could either walk with us into the dungeons and find your way into the Hufflepuff basement from there or you could take this corridor to your left. As soon as you turn around the corner ten feet into it, you'll find yourself in a pathway you are inclined to recognize since it is the one leading from the Great Hall into the basement."

"Could I talk to Blaise in privacy for a moment, sir? If that were possible I'd take this way." He had an appointment with a chaotic spirit and he didn't need the wizard's observant gaze when he decided to walk into a corridor that was leading anywhere but the Hufflepuff basement. He wanted to resolve things with Blaise first, though.

The man's black eyes stared into his for a long time and Harry had the sudden urge to disappear. A sensation not unlike the one he'd felt when examined by Professor Dumbledore just a few minutes prior rushed through him and this time, he didn't remain passive, hoping for the inspection to stop.

Within the blink of an eye, he touched the wall he'd stood close to with his fingers spread before moving them together in a fluid motion.

The older bricks were much more responsive than the ones he'd come across of in London for instead of just one, several bricks rotated, provoking a sound not unlike what was heard when Diagon Alley opened itself.

It was enough to distract the Potions Master. His eyes were instantly drawn to the origin of the unfamiliar noise. Harry used the diversion to acquire a certain air of tranquillity.

What he'd just witnessed was enough not to let his guard down around either, Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape. They were both figures of authority, he'd simply blocked out this particular awareness for he'd long ago managed to keep adults from crawling under his skin.

Those two wizards had this ability however.

They weren't like Quirrell, he was sure of that. Snape had been too understanding, far too adamant at making detention bearable. And Professor Dumbledore had been too benevolent and kind.

Nobody could fake that well, especially not the Potions professor for he had been trying to appear unconcerned while his actions were considerate.

Nevertheless, they were capable of reading him and that scared him almost as much as the potential threat he felt whenever he was near their Defence teacher.

Besides, Snape's hand in the right pocket of his cloak the moment the bricks had turned hadn't been used to extract a tissue. Harry had seen that kind of movement before. It was the way some people reached for their weapons in the face of an unknown hazard without drawing them yet.

It told him a lot about the professor's life and he was glad that the adult wasn't his enemy. His intention of making him his confidante was less appealing now, though, after having been on the other side of that penetrating look.

Professor Snape saw too much.

Said man seemed to have noticed that there was nothing dangerous nearby for his attention was back on the young orphan.

"Certainly, Mr Potter." It took Harry a moment to realize that he was answering his earlier question, "Have a restful night. Mr Zabini, curfew for First Years is in half an hour. I expect you to be in the

Common Room by then." Without another word, he continued striding towards the dungeons. Milicent, after wishing Harry goodnight and whispering to Blaise that he better be nice (causing Harry to smirk for it was quite remarkable how well the girl could read Blaise), was almost forced to run to keep up with her Head of House.

"What?" Blaise asked with his teeth clenched as soon as his cousin was out of earshot.

Harry decided that blunt questions deserved blunt answers, "I once witnessed a friend of mine be beaten into unconsciousness. The attacker fled and we were alone. Nobody came for help. I carried him to the house of a doctor nearby. Not his working place but his private home," Dr William Woods, the Doc as he was called on the streets, "I was so scared, I didn't stop talking while the Doc...tor, the doctor tried to properly examine my friend. I would've continued distracting him hadn't he called his fifteen-year-old son Henry whom he told to show me his room. I didn't want to." He'd used an impressive amount of profanities to demonstrate just how little he wanted to follow the doctor's orders, "He told me quite bluntly that I'd come to him for help and if I wanted him to help us, I had to do as I was told."

'Stop making my job harder than it already is, child! You came to me, so you follow my rules. You're one of Sully's kids, aren't you? Show respect, be quiet and go after Henry.'

It had been less than a year since Sully had... was gone. Harry had obeyed without hesitation to honour the man who'd kept him alive in his early years and who'd taught him to survive later after he was gone.

"You're telling me this, because...?" The Slytherin's gaze had softened, looking uncharacteristically grave.

"I know I'm not the easiest person to deal with when a friend is hurt, Blaise. But amongst contemporaries there might be a handful of kids who have more experience dealing with that kind of accident than myself. I tend to order around those who have their wits together when faced with a nerve-racking situation. I'm sorry if..." Now that would be a lie, "I'm not sorry, because I did what I thought was right, and this was about Neville, but I..."

Blaise's lips perked up, revealing a mild smile, "Don't. It's okay. I'm sorry for being a bit daft. I've never been in a situation like this and I didn't know what to do and then... I was glad you helped, really, I... I was angry at myself for not knowing what to do and angry at you for mocking my lack of confidence. I'm aware that wasn't what you did," he interrupted before Harry was able to protest, "My pride sometimes results in rather silly deeds."

'Mine nearly got me killed,' Harry thought gloomily, but he decided to say, "Pride does that sometimes."

"May I ask you a question?" Blaise asked after a moment of comfortable silence.

"Sure."

"How come you don't... Your accent is... I always thought that... Do you know what I'm trying to ask?" he finally asked helplessly.

"Gutter Talk," Harry helped, gladly changing topics, "How come I don't speak Gutter Talk, that's what you want to ask. Well, I can speak it, but I don't, because... Let's just say that the first person I remember to have truly cared about me was a very well-educated, elderly man. He had... He was a complicated person, but he was always kind and he taught me a lot. He was very fond of literature, too and insistent that I spoke properly. Needless to say I didn't care much for a long time until I noticed that 'Smart Talk' can be used as a verbal weapon, a weapon more effective than any swearing imaginable. That and after he... went away, I spoke that way to honour his memory." And there was hardly anything he could've done to irate Sullivan more than by speaking with an accent more sophisticated than his own.

"What was his name?" Blaise had recognized Harry's meaning at the words 'went away.'

"Sully. Don't ask me whether this was his first or last name. I don't know."

Harry then asked Blaise to tell him about his family and learned a bit more about the close relationship between the Zabinis and the Bulstrodes. Interestingly enough, the Zabini family, which included

Millicent's mother, were of African descent, but neither Blaise nor Millicent had ever been there. They were both looking forward to meeting their African family next summer after finishing their first year at Hogwarts. They were regularly visiting an uncle in the United States, but their grandmother had gone back to Africa before Millicent had turned three.

A short glance at their watches told them that it was time for them to go into their dormitories.

Wishing a good night, they departed. As soon as Blaise was out of sight, Harry took a turn, following a corridor that didn't lead towards the Hufflepuff basement.

'Time to go hunting. Or haunting if one considered my target.'

A/N: Two things.

WOW and I'm sorry.

Sorry for the update taking so long. This semester is kind of nuts. I should have more time at my disposal in May.

WOW. To say I was thrilled to notice the amount of reviews I received would be a gross understatement. EIGHTY-FIVE reviews for the last chapter, more than 900 people have put this story on alert, more than 700 marked this story as a favourite.

I'm humbled. Thank you sooo much. It's fun writing this story and I'm glad to see that you have fun reading it.

So, before I start saying something really embarrassing since I'm not quite awake yet, I'm just going to stop :)

Just, thanks and please, keep reading and reviewing as generously as you've been doing so far.

Chapter Eleven, Part Two: Down to Earth, Up in the Air

He slipped through the shadows of the castle, feeling relaxed for the first time since they'd heard Hermione call for their help.

This was familiar. This was home.

If there was one thing he'd missed at St Mary's, it was the strolling about the streets of London with the walls whispering to him. It felt marvellous being able to do it again.

Nights were never safe, but as long as you stuck to the shadows, avoiding hazards, it was all right. People could only hurt you when they knew you were there.

'Where is he? Please, tell me where he is,' he silently whispered into the darkness, addressing the walls of Hogwarts.

Almost leisurely, as if amused by the impatience of the young, the walls slowly prickled beneath his fingers, and familiar yet indefinite warmth radiated off the castle walls, indicating a clear direction.

Silently, he followed the path when all of a sudden a searing hot warning caused him to draw back into darkness, making himself unseen.

Mrs Norris turned around the corner and Harry froze.

Don't be seen... Well, that wasn't a problem, but he sincerely doubted that his level of disguise was up to a challenge with a cat's senses.

It wasn't.

He saw her lift her head, smelling into the air.

Not ready to take chances, he slipped away, and didn't stop until he was sure she no longer tried to find whatever she'd sensed.

Unfortunately, this little escape had drawn him into the opposite direction of his actual destination.

It didn't matter, though. Half an hour later, he finally found the culprit who'd hurt Neville.

The poor soul looked so miserable, all anger Harry might have felt towards the one who'd hurt his friend was replaced by compassion. According to Kertak's stories, the kranàul remained childlike for eternity.

Just another orphan.

"Why'd you do it?" Harry asked calmly.

The little man flinched heavily. Wide-eyed, he drew back into the shadows in an attempt to disappear. He failed rather profoundly. With a mixture of frustrated anger and helpless despair, Peeves snarled and retreated further away.

'Don't play games, please, not with that,' Harry demanded rather than begged the castle, 'don't use your power over him! It disgusts me.'

Withholding affection like that was just cruel.

A gasp was emitted by the spirit and partially transparent tears touched the dark floor without making a sound. Harry couldn't see his expression, but the sudden warmth surrounding him and a desperate sob from the creature told him that at least Peeves' caretaker had returned to him.

"Thanks," the underage wizard whispered into darkness.

All of a sudden, Peeves was beside him regarding him with wide, black eyes. There were no longer any tears to see when he started to speak, "You... You called her back to me."

Harry didn't comment on it. He might have shortened the malicious spirit's punishment, but that sure as hell didn't mean he wasn't furious.

"Why'd you do it?" he repeated.

"Just doing as asked, doing as my nature tells."

"His neck coulda'broke," Harry hissed sharply, completely ignoring that his accent had changed profoundly.

"Never hurt. No hurt," Peeves muttered.

"Well, you did! He's in the Infirmary!"

The poltergeist cowered a bit, looking once again like a scared child and Harry knew he couldn't just deal with him the way he would with teenagers harming his friends. He hated bullies and that was what he'd be should he continue with this behaviour towards Peeves.

"You have to understand, Peeves," he scolded the spirit gently, trying hard to ignore that he was talking to a creature that was a thousand years old, "pranks can be dangerous. You've got to be careful."

Ashamed, Peeves lowered his head.

"It's okay for now, but don't let this happen again," Harry warned, his tone mild.

"I won't," the poltergeist chattered enthusiastically. "Surely, won't hurt the itty-bitty students anymore, will make sure of that, yes I will."

"Good," Harry smiled. The spirit wasn't tame; its words had just proved that. It felt comfortable in the midst of chaos, and Harry was convinced that Peeves wouldn't forego one single prank he'd planned to do.

"What is the tiny little Puffy doing when he should be in his badgery nest?" the poltergeist asked all of sudden, his lips twitched mischievously. "Should call Filch, naughty, ickle Firsties are not supposed to wander at night."

Harry backed away quickly. He'd get into trouble if he was caught. Chaos would ensue and that was a poltergeist's entire purpose.

His movements were noticed and Peeves cackled, "Foolish little orphan, leaving his Hunting Ground, claiming her, ignoring that she already belongs to others."

Harry froze, he could feel the blood leave his face.

"What did you just say?" he whispered, "You know me?"

"Creating havoc he does, driving the Nasty One barmy. Hiding things, protecting the other little ones, small himself but strong... Punished for evoking self in Hell."

Harry's hands started to shake in distress. He choked, "What?"

"Chaos. Its children and servants we are and we are with it at all times. Chaos ensues, we see the cause. Little weasels are a challenge since they first came, but the twins are above the single ones."

Harry had no idea what the spirit was talking about and he couldn't care less. Peeves' words were echoing in his mind. He had to know more and the first question that came to mind was, "What do you know?"

"Burn, burn, burn. The quiet one's mind was about to leave, 'Burn, burn, burn!' the little one said and it is hell's nature to burn, so it burned, burned, burned, nothing but ashes on the ground."

Harry could have sworn his heart skipped a beat. He broke into cold sweat, his skin prickled; his entire body was ready to run away.

Shakily, he tried to take a breath, but it was impossible.

"There, there, little boy," Peeves' voice was not made for tenderness; it fit about as well as if a clown was holding a speech at a funeral. It was almost mocking him. "No distress, nobody got hurt, never hurt. It's not chaos' nature to hurt."

"It was close," Harry whispered, "I didn't... I just wanted it to stop." A sob caught in his throat and his eyes filled with tears. He refused to cry, though.

A few weeks prior to the day Hell burned, Sullivan had gotten to Char, who'd started to shut down as a result. Harry had known that he'd lose his brother if they didn't get out immediately. Therefore he'd been ready to take a risk.

But he hadn't expected the building to respond so fiercely. Usually, the orphanage hardly answered at all.

He had to have uttered his last thought for the poltergeist said, "It was afraid of the Nasty One."

"It's a bloody building! What could he've possibly done? Tear it down with his bare hands? Come on!"

It took a lot of Harry's willpower not to scream.

"Just afraid. Not used to nastiness. Retreated. Disappeared. Until the little one came who woke it up."

Harry's head started to hurt. He now knew why poltergeists were called chaotic spirits... Their reasoning was unlike a human's or most other intelligent beings'. It could drive a sane person mad.

"Wait. Just wait a second..." The underage wizard silently replayed everything he'd just heard and tried to understand what he'd just been told.

"Kranàul are spirits of chaos, they are individuals yet part of a whole." So far, so good. "You know when and where chaos ensues as well as who caused it, but you don't seem to be drawn to it, I mean... Not a single poltergeist ever came to take a look."

"Little one did well on his own."

Sure, but he could've used some help.

"Forbidden," Peeves said eventually.

Ah, that made more sense.

"Because you know what you know, you know who I am and... Well, you know what happened at Hell." He had to stop for a moment before he was able to continue evenly, "But what about buildings? London's walls whisper, so does Hogwarts. They have a 'sense of self', a life if you will, but what about Hell? It never talked, it just... burned all of a sudden."

"London's walls communicate, but Hell stood alone, isolated by its wall of stone. Young, like a toddler." Peeves' strained, mocking tone didn't sound any more serious than before, but there was something in his black eyes that told Harry he was being honest.

Harry still didn't understand though, not completely. Why, of all damned buildings in the world, would that house be innocent? He'd hated it.

Maybe that was why it never talked to him.

A short glance at his watch told him that it was time to go to sleep, but more importantly, he wanted to end this conversation on good terms without the past being on the forefront of his mind. "I didn't quite get your weasel comment..."

"Oh, the weasels with the flaming red hair. Yes, the double's better than all the singles put together."

Fred and George. Of course, a chaos spirit had to like the two troublemakers. Harry grinned at the thought of the humorous duo, a facial expression he could see mirrored in Peeves' face.

"As you reminded me, it's already past curfew. It... I'd..."

He couldn't say it had been nice... He'd come to scold and had ended up being reminded of that one big risk he'd taken which had almost ended up in a catastrophe.

A risk he'd still take for Char and Kertak. Any day, no questions asked. He just shuddered at the thought of what could have happened.

He couldn't say he'd enjoyed the talk either, it had been emotionally draining, but he kind of wanted to get to know this strange creature better, so he had to say something positive.

Thankfully, the poltergeist knew what to say when the storyteller lacked the proper words. "Friends, yes? We have to stick together, orphans do."

Slightly confused, Harry said, "You're hardly an orphan, Peeves."

"We are orphans. Chaos is the orphanage, a good cosy one, but we are never me as long as I am not awoken to a new home with mother or father." All mockery was gone and a new wave of sympathy went through Harry. Hogwarts had the role of an adoptive parent. That made the castle's actions even worse.

"Friends," the boy said solemnly, which earned a true smile from the spirit.

Monday morning was hard.

Harry hadn't been able to put the past behind him as smoothly and irrevocably as he'd hoped. He'd hardly slept at first and very nearly overslept in the end, although their first two periods were off.

He hadn't gone to bed straight away, earning an inquiring look from both, Justin and Ernie.

He'd written a short letter to Char.

'Please, write. I can't see you, true, but when I see the letter I'll hear your voice telling me whatever you've written. Just write what you'd say if we were talking face-to-face... Had one Hell of a nightmare.' It hadn't been a nightmare per se, more like the past coming back to haunt him. Char would understand the allusion. 'How are they? Sara, Luke, Grey... Tommy as well... What about the others? You too, of course.

Feel bad for having abandoned you guys. I know we're not supposed to give up chances, but what if that's what they always do, the parents who leave their kids? What if they think that leaving was for the best? What's that anyway, the best I mean? Sorry for the mayhem, but I'm tired. Please write. Harry'

The letter didn't satisfy him, but he'd been so tired and Char knew him well enough to understand his babbling.

He felt guilty for approaching his best friend over this because he remembered Char's reaction when they'd last seen a reminder of their terrible past. His brother wasn't ready to talk about it, yet. If Harry was honest with himself, neither was he. But had to, otherwise he'd... He didn't know what would happen, but it would be bad. Therefore, he had to talk, but with whom? Luke, Sara and Grey were

too young and they hadn't been there for so long. Kertak didn't know half of what happened. Sister Augustine wasn't an option. Alex didn't know anything either. There was only Char.

When he gave the newly arrived Hedwig his letter, he felt horrible for the reaction he'd cause: a violent flinch, a blanching face, laboured breaths.

He closed his eyes and stroke Hedwig's feathers before he left the Owlry, while Hedwig flew out of the window to find her friend's substitute brother.

His absence hadn't been noticed by anybody except his dorm mates and he was grateful for that.

Thankfully, his classmates as well as Theo, who had joined them for breakfast, noticed that he was tired and though including him into their conversations, they didn't bother him at all.

The only good things happening this morning happened in Herbology started with Neville's return from the Hospital Wing to class. Then Professor Sprout told him after class that the First Year Hufflepuff's actions in their last History lesson had been duly noted and that the school had received some letters from parents who were supporting the idea of a replacement for Professor Binns.

"You wrote your parents about that?" the emerald-eyed boy asked his peers as soon as they left the Greenhouses after saying their goodbyes to the Gryffindors.

"Of course," Hannah answered instantly, "I wrote them a letter on Friday. Professor Binns didn't tell us everything. What he deliberately kept from us is awful! And Merlin only knows to what extent he's been doing this for the past however many years. I would've never even suspected it, hadn't you told us. The schoolbook doesn't say what you told us either, as if..." she stopped, gesturing wildly in an attempt to find the right words.

"As if it was only written from one side's point of view?" Harry finished for her. She nodded.

"I wrote to my aunt and my parents as well," Susan commented. "My parents wrote back that they'll look into this. They don't remember

much off their own education in history. My aunt hasn't replied yet, but she's been rather busy lately. She'll write, though. She always does."

Harry's lips formed into a smile, which displayed both amusement and affection. "You're close to your aunt, aren't you?"

Susan hunched her shoulders, obviously embarrassed. "I'm from a big family and she's the smartest person I know. I always approach her with my troubles, so does my father. He's her younger brother. And she's a close friend of my mum's."

"What did your parents say?"

"That they wrote a letter to Professor Dumbledore, telling him that it might be time to find a replacement for Professor Binns. History's important, I mean, we can't keep repeating the mistakes from the past."

"Couldn't agree more," Harry said, this time he was smiling openly.

"I told my parents as well," Eloise chimed in. "My mother's not a witch, so she doesn't understand much about magic. But she's a History teacher herself, and she knows how important it is never to forget the past. She wants me to be educated properly in that department. She also wants to learn more about the Wizarding World and its history. Daddy wrote a letter to Professor Dumbledore as well."

"Wow!" was all Harry could say. "That's... I didn't think you'd... Thank you. Your support last Friday was very kind, but this is above and beyond what you should have done. I didn't mean to drag you into a reforming movement after all but one week at Hogwarts."

"Don't mention it," Hannah said, grinning like the Cheshire Cat, "Hufflepuffs, remember? We're a loyal bunch." All of a sudden, her expression was sober again. "As for the reforming movement. I'm really glad we started that."

"Definitely," Susan said, looking rather proud of her actions. "Besides, don't think of us as some poor little girls incapable of having a single original thought."

The eleven-year-old boy was stunned. He sputtered, "I don't!"

Harry would have given quite a lot to know how to reply appropriately to such a statement. He was relieved when Justin came up, asking them what they had next.

"Defence," Eloise said and Harry's blood ran cold.

"You okay, Harry?" Justin enquired.

"Yeah. Not my favourite subject is all." How could any subject be remotely acceptable when you seriously disliked, or in this case, distrusted its teacher?

After that conversation, the morning just kept getting worse.

First, they encountered Laciús and Draco Malfoy flanked by the latter's two beefy bodyguards. In itself, that wouldn't have been bad, Harry could have just ignored them.

It was the conversation that threw him off-balance.

After they passed them, the young Slytherin spoke up, "Hey, Susan! What does your aunt think about you being in the company of an untidy orphan? Look at his clothes... I bet he used to steal from innocent people to get enough to eat." The last sentence was underlined with a contemptuous chuckle.

For a moment, Harry wondered if life was easier, had he just ignored the letter, learned some magic from Kertak and be done with it.

It certainly caused less stress to be at home, taking care of his family, worst thing happening was Tommy getting hurt, injuries that were never serious.

Ever since he'd come here, his patience had been tested by several people, more than once by the two individuals he was looking at. Then Flint. Then Peeves to a certain point. The latter had managed to remind him of a past he'd rather forget, of a life he wanted to leave behind and of the greatest mistake he'd ever made. He was constantly surrounded by adults he didn't know whether or not he could trust. He was worried about what was happening at home.

He'd just written a letter that was bound to take Char aback, simply because he wasn't able to bear the burden alone.

He was sick and tired of being constantly on edge. And he wouldn't accept being called a thief.

Angrily, he took a step forward, but when he saw the four underage wizards grabbing for their wands he was reminded with maddening clarity that they were by far more familiar with that piece of wood than he was, even though they didn't own their wands for longer than he had his.

Unfortunately, most of his tricks required contact or at least close proximity.

There were exceptions, but those were for emergencies, not petty little fights between Others and him.

"Oh," the blond boy sneered, "and a short temper he has, too."

Instantly, Harry was calm again. It was the kind of calm that was before a storm, this tense calmness that made your skin crawl.

He could deal with a mere fight of words.

"Coming from the guy whose hand slipped into his pocket the minute I turned around. Even if I was a pick-pocket, be assured I'm not that good."

That earned muffled laughter from the small crowd which had formed at Malfoy's provocation.

The blond boy gritted his teeth in return, but Laciús lifted his hand in what seemed like a soothing gesture. "Draco's just worried, Susan. One week ago, hardly anybody knew he existed. What do you really know about him?"

"Enough to know he's a nice person," she said steadily. "And it's none of your business! Come on, guys!"

She walked away towards the Defence classroom, quickening her pace in the process while the others followed her.

"What was that all about?" Eloise asked, completely puzzled. Justin looked about as confused, while Ernie seemed to have trouble meeting Harry's eyes.

"Nothing," Susan hissed, "just Draco being an idiot!"

"You know him well?" Harry asked neutrally.

"His father holds a lot of power in the Ministry and my father as well as my aunt work there. They're dealing with him rather frequently. You see," she sighed, "my family belongs to this ridiculously exclusive society also named Pureblood families. Almost all of my relations are wizards and witches. Some people, like the Malfoy family believe that this makes them superior to the rest. It's rubbish, of course..." Clearing her throat, she continued, "Anyway, since they believe themselves superior, they first and foremost deal with families they believe to be equal, therefore also mine. So yes, to answer your question, I know Draco well enough. We saw each other every once in a while when we were little."

"And why would your aunt care if Harry was wearing dishevelled clothing?" Justin asked, now clearly avoiding the smaller boy's gaze. He didn't dare to repeat the other accusation, having noticed Harry's reaction well enough.

Susan thought it best not to repeat Malfoy's comment either. "Easy. My aunt is the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Copper! Oh crap!

Harry managed not to flinch, which was remarkable in itself. He liked Susan, he really did, she was witty and kind, but years of 'Run! Coppers are comin'!' couldn't be ignored that easily. Logically, he knew that Susan wasn't her aunt, that her aunt most likely wasn't anything like some of the policemen he'd met in the past. However, he'd also witnessed just how much the young witch trusted on her aunt's judgement, as much as her parents' even.

Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Harry shuddered at the thought. They'd certainly see through every single one of his tricks and would be able to catch him anyway.

And Susan's aunt was the Head of said department.

"Harry?" Eloise tentatively touched his forearm. "You okay? We're here."

He hadn't even noticed their arrival at the classroom for Defence.

Wonderful. This morning was just getting better and better.

"T-T-T-Today," Quirrell stuttered after they'd all taken their seats, "We... we are going t-t-to discuss the phy-physiol-physiology of va-vampires." He shuddered.

Harry was tense. It bothered him that he was unable to say what upset him about this particular teacher. Usually, he witnessed certain behavioural patterns, overly aggressive or manipulative people for example, which cautioned him in his dealings with that particular person. This wasn't the case here, though. Quirrell was the perfect image of a shy if slightly weird but completely harmless young man.

It was just that...

His musings stopped abruptly when Quirrell turned around in order to write on the blackboard.

Again he felt like someone had just rammed a knife into his stomach and he was unable to suppress a quiet, painful moan. That wasn't all, though. Something was wrong. For the third time within less than twenty-four hours, Harry had the feeling of being studied. Only this time, there was no face looking at him. It was like Quirrell had eyes on his back.

Cold eyes.

With an intensity Dumbledore and Snape had lacked, Harry had the horrifying feeling of being examined. An examination that brought forth memories he'd pushed away as far as possible.

'Harry, come back here!' a panicked voice exclaimed.

'Sara's still inside!'

'You can't help her!' a shadow stepped in between him and the flames. He lifted his head.

'Move aside, Matt,' his voice was calm and icy, 'or I'll move you.'

A gasp escaped Harry; he violently flinched, jumped from his stool and scrambled back a few steps.

What the bleeding hell was that?

Quirrell flinched as well and turned around, "M-M-Mister P-Po-P-Potter. What...?"

Harry stared into the teacher's eyes, looking for a sign that he had anything to do with what just happened. He saw nothing.

"Sorry, Professor," Harry said. 'Lie, lie, lie!' his mind chanted, 'Anything...', "There was a... a spider, sir. I don't like them very much."

"Oh, oh, yes. That... That's under-under-understandable," the timid teacher shuddered, "Some-Some are known to fo-form alli-ally-alliances with prac-practiti-practitioners of the D-D-D-Dark Arts."

There it was. For less than the blink of an eye, the twitching face was gone. There was coldness in it Harry was all too familiar with.

Whatever way he'd done it, Quirrell was responsible for the short reminder of his past.

The young orphan knew with crystal clarity that he'd yet again managed to make himself an enemy.

He was only eleven years old and was already facing his third enemy. Four, if one took the wizard into account who'd murdered his parents.

If only he'd ignored the letter.

For the rest of the torturous lesson, Harry avoided to look at Quirrell, whether back or face. He kept his head down, but registered every

move the wizard made, every breath he took, every faltering in his tone.

The stutter and nervousness didn't fool him anymore. His instincts told him that their Defence teacher was dangerous, and this time, he'd act on it.

"Make sure you're never alone with Quirrell," Harry said to his peers as soon as they left the classroom and he'd checked that the young professor was still where they'd left him.

"Excuse me?" Eloise's confusion was evident.

"Something is wrong with this man and it has nothing to do with his stutter," Harry clarified when he saw Ernie opening his mouth in protest.

"Why do you think so?" Susan asked. She sounded more curious than anything else, and the emerald-eyed boy was grateful to have found such a loyal friend within such a short time.

"I didn't scramble away from a spider," he merely said. What he tried to convince them of was crazy enough. It was better not to add, 'He made me relive parts of my past' to the madness. Besides, it would lead to questions he was yet unwilling to answer.

"That's ridiculous!" Justin exclaimed. This was too much! He liked Harry, he really did. The boy was smart, nice and a good dorm mate, but this... He'd liked playing along with the whole 'you're dismissed' scenario with Binns. That had been fun and, hey, who wouldn't jump at the idea of finishing classes early? Well, Hermione Granger maybe, but still... Yesterday evening, when Harry had come in late and asked them not to tell anyone, that hadn't been a problem either. Snape had acted rather harshly on Harry's actions... Nothing within the past seven days had put him off, not really, but this was plain crazy. "Have you ever watched the guy? He's petrified facing his own shadow! There's no danger coming from him."

Impatiently, the son of a lawyer and a house-wife waited for the orphan's answer.

"I know it sounds crazy," the small boy said calmly. "Believe me, it's even crazier when I'm trying to explain things to you. That doesn't

mean I'm wrong. Some..." Silence. Harry's finger flew to his lips and he warningly shook his head.

The message was clear: 'Shut up!'

They were all quiet and for several moments nothing happened. Then, Quirrell turned around the corner.

"Have you been able to answer all of Professor McGonagall's questions?" Harry asked Susan casually causing Justin to startle. He'd stared at Quirrell for a moment, which seemed to have been noticed by the orphan.

"No, not really," Susan answered without hesitation and Justin couldn't help but feel admiration for that girl. She certainly knew how to deal with nerve-wracking situations. "I had troubles with question twelve, you know, the one about... Hello, Professor!" It was spoken so casually, as if Harry's words had never been uttered.

"H-Hello, Ms B-B-B-Bones. Enjoy you-your lunch b-break!"

"Thanks, sir," the orphan had the gall to speak no less casually than Susan.

When Quirrell had swept around the next corner, Harry's left hand shot up while his right touched the wall. For a moment, he seemed to listen to something before lowering his warning hand.

"Okay, what was that?" Justin was so glad to hear Ernie ask the question he thought about as well.

"Look, trust me! I've dealt with guys like Quirrell before, well not exactly that kind of person, but there's something icy in the depth of his eyes..." The way he talked, one could think he was an old man, but that wasn't the issue here. Ernie seemed to think alike.

"No, not about that. That's too crazy to discuss about. How did you know he'd come?"

The question surprised the ever so collected Harry.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"You shut up out of the blue and told us to shut up, therefore you knew he'd come. How did you know?" the tall First Year clarified.

"I... I heard him, or rather I fe..." Justin had never heard the eloquent boy struggle with words. Additionally, Harry avoided eye-contact which was very unusual. He had a frighteningly penetrating gaze and would always look you in the eyes while he talked.

Now, he looked timid and almost nervous.

"I don't think you'll get out of this one, Harry." Susan reprimanded him softly. Did she know anything?

Seconds, even minutes, passed, but the orphan didn't speak. Until finally... "Do you remember our discussion with Professor Flitwick on the classification of magic last week?"

Please, not another story to distract them from the issue!

"Yes..." Hannah said, her eyebrows furrowed, sounding wary.

"The reason why I mentioned fire, earth, air and water is because... Earth kind of talks to me?" It sounded more like a question than a statement. "When I know a place well, or it is as powerful as Hogwarts, it kind of tells me where my targ... people I'm looking for are."

Okay, this was without a single doubt the craziest thing he'd ever heard. This was worse even than when Professor McGonagall had started to explain to his mother that a wizard could be dangerous without proper education because they lacked control over their magic.

Ernie, Susan, Hannah and Sally gasped almost simultaneously. Eloise looked about as confused as he felt.

Harry made himself a bit smaller and visibly flinched when he heard his name called by those three First Year Slytherins Harry was frequently meeting with: Blaise Zabini, Millicent Bulstrode and Theodore Nott, if he remembered the names correctly.

"Where were you? You said you'd join us for lunch!"

"I apologize," Harry said, quickly adjusting to the new situation, "I'm coming."

"No, you won't!"

Yes, Justin definitely admired Susan Bones.

"What's wrong?" Millicent asked, while Theodore took a silent step next to Harry. It was clear that he'd make sure the smaller boy could leave if he wanted to.

If Harry didn't talk, this was acceptable. He was nice and certainly didn't deserve to be rattled out, therefore none of the Badgers talked into the silence following the female Snake's question.

However, Harry did explain and Justin was a bit surprised to see that he was obviously more comfortable with relying things to those three than the rest of them.

Well, they'd cornered him a bit. Besides, Harry was much more relaxed when he was alone with only Susan, Hannah and Eloise. He probably would have talked much more openly hadn't Sally, Ernie and him been present.

That knowledge stung a bit.

When Harry finished, every Slytherin looked a bit stunned.

"What set you off?" Theodore Nott asked, obviously thinking that Quirrell was a more important topic than Harry's strange ability.

"His eyes. There's something..."

"They don't twitch as much as his body," the Slytherin continued for him, "kind of cold."

"Yes, exactly!" when Harry smiled gratefully, Justin noticed that he hadn't been smiling much at all today. And that was unusual. His personality was rather sombre, but he did smile rather regularly

Justin had never heard him laugh, though. At least not a carefree, completely-over-the-top happy laugh. That wasn't unusual, however. Maybe, he just missed home like everybody else.

"We'll make sure the word spreads," Blaise Zabini promised, "and don't worry, the other teachers won't find out about this."

"Wait a minute!" Sally had decided it was time for her to interfere. "You just believe him? He tells you that a timid, overall harmless man is somehow evil and you are ready to spread such awful rumour. I heard that Slytherin were malicious and manipulative, but I didn't believe it. It is common knowledge that Laci Longbottom is friends with a couple of Slytherins, so they can't be all bad. But you, you are willing to ruin an honourable teacher's reputation on what exactly? A hunch? A hunch uttered by an orphan with a dubious past, who's making friends with goblins, who possesses traces of abilities that are more than just questionable?"

Justin wouldn't have been all too surprised, had Harry physically attacked Sally. She'd practically just accused him of being a lying lunatic with dangerous tendencies.

However, Harry's face fell before it became unreadable.

"I trust Harry's judgement more than listening to your senseless chatter, Whatever-Your-Name-Is," Millicent Bulstrode hissed, her rather rough face wore a murderous expression. "Leave him al..." She was interrupted when a soothing hand reached up and touched her shoulder. The orphan whispered something into her ear, Justin was unable to understand.

Harry took a step forward and Justin had the sudden urge to run, though the small boy didn't look frightening at all. He simply looked as if he hadn't slept last night.

"Sally-Anne," the raven-haired boy said calmly, "I am sorry. Sorry for dragging you into this. I don't have proof, just my instincts telling me something's wrong. I understand if that isn't enough for you. I've been wrong before. Please, just do me two favours, though: be careful around Quirrell. And don't go to a teacher over this. Without proof it's my word against a teacher's... And unless I'm fairly mistaken, they'd think rather like you. However," the soft face hardened a bit, "don't insult my friends simply because they trust me. Besides, I have many flaws, but befriending goblins is not one of them. They are a lot like humans, their culture is just a bit different from the Wizarding World's, is all."

Sally-Anne huffed and looked at Ernie who regretfully shouldered his backpack and followed her. Justin was once again torn between his friends and that bunch of kids he'd really liked to get to know more.

"Justin, you're welcome any time," Harry said, his eyes looking a bit sad and resigned, as if he'd just realized that Sally and him were too different to get along.

Justin said goodbye and ran after Ernie and Sally.

"... Arrogant know-it-all," she ranted, not even noticing Justin's arrival, "'I am so calm, behaving so mature, because I'm better than the rest of you.' He has no idea. He doesn't respect teachers, he doesn't respect authority. Have you seen how he reacted when he heard that Susan's aunt was Amelia Bones? Scared. I am sure he was scared. Only crooks are afraid of law enforcement. "

"Sally," Justin said sadly, "I know you don't like Harry and it's your right, I guess, but this is getting ridiculous. So, he views things a bit differently. May I remind you that you had to explain the principles of Quidditch to me as well as you had to tell me who the current Minister of Magic was. You didn't complain about that."

"Why would I? You're Muggleborn. How could I expect you to know everything about wizarding society?"

"How could you expect that from Harry?"

"That's different. He should've just waited, not received some lesser tutelage from goblins. You heard what he can do."

"Yeah. What's up with that?"

A/N: Again a late update. Sorry. I hope to be updating more regularly in the future.

I don't have much to say except for a big, delighted THANK YOU. You've been extremely generous with your reviewing and I can't even tell you how great it is to read so many reviews :)

So, before it's getting all too mushy: Thank you so much and in case you asked a question that I didn't respond to, please remind me

again. I read every review you send me, sometimes I just forget to respond to questions.

Hopefully, the next update will be sooner.

Chapter 11, Part Three: Down to Earth, Up in the Air

"This thing I told you I can do..." Harry asked Susan after having decided to let the issue with Sally-Anne rest, "what's up with that?"

"Oh, that..." Susan hesitated. "You've got the Influence. The passive form, at least... Well, no actually, now that you mention it..." she stopped, thinking hard.

"Passive Influence?" Harry's eyebrows almost vanished beneath the mess that was his raven-black hair. "And here I was, thinking that influence always required some sort of activity."

"The Wizarding Community tends to be a bit overdramatic," Blaise stated, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"That may be, but could you guys be a bit more specific? Is this somehow common knowledge?"

"Dad's a wizard, but you're not the only one not knowing what this is about." Eloise said, her hand tentatively lifted, as if she was still in class and wanted to answer a professor's question without being quite sure of herself.

"It's a bit like Parseltongue," Millicent stated. "It's rare, but everybody knows about it."

When she saw the look on Harry's face, which displayed a mixture of amusement and annoyance ('Thanks, that really helped,' those eyes said exasperatedly), she quickly continued, "Well, you see... The Influence is the ability to manipulate the elements, mainly fire, while Passive Influence means they can influence you... Which sounds a lot worse than it is," she added quickly at Harry's expression. "It's pretty much what you said: earth is talking to you, warning you perhaps. Blaise, as much as my clumsiness with words may amuse you, I'd like to have some help," she hissed without malice.

"I don't see why, you've said pretty much all there is to know. If you have the Influence you are able to control the elements, usually fire, along the lines of being able to light a candle, but a full-fledged inferno is possible as well." Harry swallowed drily, but he managed to contain an emotional mask displaying nothing but interest.

"Passive Influence means that you're listening to your surroundings more closely than most people. The first is a lot less common than the last. However, you should be careful whom you're telling this."

Harry's mouth suddenly felt dry. "So, it's a bad thing?"

"No, it's a gift," Hannah stated firmly. "My mother told me the story of that woman who found a missing child, thanks to this ability."

"It is a gift," Theo agreed, but he looked serious. "However, people have a tendency to be jealous of anyone better than them, and are naturally suspicious of everything they don't understand. You shouldn't hide it. I'm just saying you shouldn't..."

"Flaunt it," Harry caught on immediately. "Won't. I thought this wasn't... You're all wizards and witches, aren't you? I didn't expect to be different." His voice sounded flat with that last statement.

His biggest worry had been that he wouldn't be good enough to go to Hogwarts. Only a week later, he found out that disability was the least of his problems.

'Look at it from the bright side: you won't get expelled for lacking in magical power. That only leaves trouble, lack of knowledge, trouble, display of unacceptable abilities and more trouble," he thought cynically.

"Our grandmother has Passive Influence," Blaise offered, obviously seeing Harry's dark mood. "She can find water when it's long gone from the surface because of it. It's a precious gift where she's from and it was also the reason why she went back home eight years ago."

Harry nodded, thanking wordlessly for the consolation. "So, her element is water?"

"And earth," Millicent chimed in, seemingly having caught up on Harry's state of mind as well. "Natural earth, though. She hated cities, never went close to London with the exception of the days she arrived and flew back home again. Always said that cities are disturbing and loud."

"Really?" Harry smiled a bit, a bit taken aback. "It's like a soft murmur. The city itse..." Sharply, he cut himself off. "Forget what I said."

"Now you just offend us." Theo stated, cruelly honest as always. "What do you think we are? Some of those prejudiced bigots that don't see beyond their own noses? Give us a little more credit than that. We are your friends, three of which have already said that this was a gift. How likely do you think it is for the other three of us to think differently?"

Harry smirked and lowered his head acceptance. "Not very. But guys...?"

"We were just talking about the flying lesson that we're having this week, right?" Millicent stated casually, causing the rest of the group to laugh. She kindly wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders (since she was quite a bit taller than him, that wasn't a problem) and continued, "I must tell you, I can't wait to see you on a broom."

For a moment, the young Hufflepuff smirked, but his face fell the moment he registered the meaning of his friend's words. "Wait, what do you mean by 'flying lessons'?"

"Do you remember what your father told us about that time he persuaded Nyanya to mount a broom?" Millicent snickered, provoking joyous laughter from Blaise.

"Merlin, yes! Those who listen to earth usually like sticking to it."

With widened eyes, Harry stared at the cousins. It wasn't true horror, he knew that, but the thrill and fear of what was about to come caused him to react like a young boy for once. "Hey! You're being unfair! What happened...?"

"Let's just say that she kissed the soil the moment she landed and swore never to ride a broom ever again," Blaise grinned.

They walked towards the Great Hall when Susan spoke up, "I have a question about that matter we haven't been talking about... When we were running to Snape's class... Did you use the Influence? Because that would mean your ability's not solely passive."

"No, that was some Rune magic. Transparency is one of the most useful runes there are. All you need is a strong will," Harry explained.

He was neither an idiot nor a fool.

He knew he had the Influence (he would have to read up on that): he could move earth and fire.

He had the Passive Influence as well, again with both, fire and earth.

Harry wasn't a fool, though. As much as he liked them all, he had to keep in mind that they only knew each other for a week... It was one thing to talk about common abilities, it was completely another to chat about being special.

It seemed as if Sullivan hadn't been so wrong after all by calling him a freak. He would be damned if he let that person influence his actions, though.

Nevertheless, caution was the best course of action in this case.

"I'll have to ask Kertak, but if he gives his permission I'll show it to you. It's a good trick to know."

Trick.

He almost laughed.

Yes, his little tricks... Who'd have thought they were anything more than a neat arsenal of survival methods?

His offer was met with enthusiasm.

He grew serious one last time before lunch.

"Could you do me a favour? You can talk about this, of course, but make sure nobody else hears about this." He winced when he remembered Sally-Anne's words. "On top of everybody else."

"Not even Hermione, Ron and Neville?" Millicent asked. She'd taken a liking to Hermione's intelligence and their shared enthusiasm for school.

"Hermione is already reading up on it, so it's only a matter of time until she finds out herself. She's discreet, so that isn't a problem. Ron strikes to me as the kind of person that cherishes secrets and keeps them fiercely to himself, once he's entrusted with them. Neville..." he hesitated.

"Yeah," Susan said with understanding, "It's better if he doesn't know."

"Why?" Blaise and Theo asked simultaneously.

"His brother and I don't get along particularly well," Harry said casually.

"Lacius Longbottom? Hadn't Hermione told us how shabbily he treated her, I wouldn't have believed it. He's not nasty. He seems smart, just a bit pompous, but hey, he's the Boy Who Lived! That doesn't surprise me at all," Blaise added casually.

"And his choice of friends is questionable at best," Millicent added darkly. "Draco Malfoy is the reason why I sometimes feel ashamed of having grown up with money. Besides, not that it was ever proved, but there are rumours of his father having been a Death Eater when He Who Must Not Be Named was rising."

"A Death what?" Harry really should have asked more about the Wizarding World.

"Death Eaters. You-Know-Who's followers," Susan explained.

Harry snorted darkly, "I'm starting to see what you mean by the Wizarding World's tendency for being overdramatic... Voldemort and his Death Eaters. I definitely prefer Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves."

"Ali Who?"

Like this, Arabian Nights became one of the many themes to discuss at lunch.

Monday afternoon was quiet and Harry had some time studying before coming by the Hospital Wing at seven.

Madame Pomfrey stated that she was positively surprised with his experience in non-magical examination and quizzed him about his knowledge in first aid. She told him quite plainly that he wouldn't be learning anything magical from her for many months. Most likely not before next year, mainly because he wasn't with her every day, only at Sunday for inventory.

Harry had to admit that it was unlikely for him to come by more than once or twice a week since there was too much to do for school itself. He hoped to come by at another evening, preferably on a workday, though.

Nevertheless, Madame Pomfrey also promised to answer any question as best as she could and she was willing to teach him a bit.

After setting Sunday evening as official date, the matron handed Harry a strict nutrition plan.

"You are too thin," she said sternly. "The house-elves have already been informed of this plan. They will stick to it word by word until I say something else, so don't even try to argue about this."

Harry thought of Trinky and shuddered at the thought of arguing with her. "I wouldn't dare. Thanks for this."

"Don't thank me, Mr Potter," she said as sternly as before. "If I don't see any improvement, I'm going to have you examined to make sure you're not ill."

Hopefully, he'd gain some weight soon.

Apart from the impression that he was being force-fed by three different house-elves, Trinky being the most persistent of them all, Tuesday morning went smoothly.

The twins, his Slytherin friends, Hermione, Ron and Neville had actually managed to meet at seven. Today, they'd sat down at the Gryffindor table.

They'd had a lot of fun and it was as if they'd already been doing that for years. Harry cherished it.

There had been the slightly strange appearance of a kid named Oliver Wood who reminded Fred and George of Quidditch practise, although they 'won't stand a chance anyway if we don't get an acceptable Seeker immediately.'

Also, a Seventh Year told them that Binns was under surveillance for the time being after having screamed at a couple of Gryffindor Fifth Years because they'd been finishing their Rune's homework in class. Usually, he didn't even notice that, but apparently he'd been on edge all day yesterday.

And that was the reason why he dreaded walking into that classroom right now.

"He's a ghost," Susan said, standing beside him. "Look at it from the bright side... He can neither bite nor hex us."

"But they can be pretty nasty," Ernie warned. He looked more than just slightly worried, but he stood firmly behind Harry.

"Maybe he won't remember us," Eloise whispered hopefully, "I mean, he can't remember our names, there's a good chance he..."

"Doesn't know the class that started this whole thing?" Harry asked sceptically. "I wouldn't count on it." At that, he took a step forward and opened the door.

Binns was already floating above his desk. He didn't look like that boring, old wizard they'd only seen last week. He looked like a predator whose prey had just intruded his territory. Prey that was foolish enough to have irked him before.

Susan and Hannah looked at each other. Discreetly, as if she did it everyday, Hannah slipped out of the classroom.

Harry noticed her departure, but he couldn't focus on the meaning of it because he didn't dare to look away from the looming threat in front of him.

"Be seated," Binns' tone left no argument. Reluctantly, Harry obeyed. Deliberately, he took the seat closest to the teacher. An almost triumphant glimmer appeared in Binns' face and Harry felt himself tense up, his breathing quickened.

"Today, we'll be looking at a time-span of three hundred years. You see, in the late seventeenth century, Albertus Binns, a very successful business man had an office giving loans to people in financial need. He was very fair and honourable and yet managed to earn enough money to take care of his five children. Then, a similar office was opened not too far away and their demands concerning tribute were much lower. Of course, Albertus Binns tried to keep up with the other business and by doing so he ruined his family business while the other company's owner lived in clover."

Harry knew where this was going and it allowed him to relax a little for Binns would be using words, not physical violence.

"The owner was Gringotts. The unholy bank of greedy goblins," he hissed coldly and Harry had the sense of self-preservation not to protest. Kertak wouldn't want him to get hurt or in trouble because a bitter, foolish man like Binns.

"The loss of money had a devastating effect on the family. Albertus Binns' youngest daughter didn't survive the winter," Binns was all but shaking with anger. "His oldest son, who was still attending to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, knowing that the family's tragedy was caused by those cursed goblins, did his best to learn all about them, so he could list all their wrong-doings and make the rest of the Wizarding World see what those rebellious creatures were truly like. However, it was important to be subtle since the rebellions had just ended and both, goblins and wizards were trying to rekindle their intercourse. Through a wonderful coincidence, the oldest son was asked to come to Hogwarts' School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where he could warn future witches and wizards about those little but dangerous, foul creatures."

Nobody dared to breathe when they saw Binns' face.

With the exception Sally-Anne.

"That is horrible, Professor," she exclaimed in horror, and Harry couldn't help but stare at her. Did she really support Binns on this?

"You couldn't have possibly been impartial on the goblin wars. What if you were accusing them innocently, only because you were blinded due to your own misfortunes?"

Harry almost groaned. She was right, of course. He was just baffled at her complete lack of people skills.

With a roar Professor Binns emptied his desk, demonstrating plainly what a furious ghost was capable of.

"For three hundred years," he whispered, trembling with anger, before he screamed, "I HAVE BEEN TEACHING AT THIS SCHOOL AND YOU LITTLE SPAWNS COME HERE, DARING TO JUDGE ME!"

Harry had quickly risen from his seat, an escape plan in mind already. If he managed to distract the professor, he could usher the others out of classroom door while he took the window.

"Me, Cuthbert Binns, who has been here for longer than any living being inside of this castle. But they all came to me, warning me, telling me that my information would be checked carefully," he continued. His voice was tense, but he was no longer shouting. "All because of you!" with burning eyes, he looked at Susan, "Miss Burton, you are responsible! I took a look at the files meant to pollute my reputation and I saw your name. This is your fault!"

Harry stood between Susan and Binns by the time the ghost advanced the girl, but how do you fight something that wasn't solid?

A chill went through Harry as Binns passed right through him and he turned around pushing Susan aside.

"Leave the bloody classroom!" he hissed at the petrified students who were still sitting at their desk, "Now! Get help!"

"You," Binns muttered after he was prevented from reaching his target yet again when Harry spun Susan aside while trying not to hurt her.

Harry saw his chance.

"Yeah, me," he sneered. "Surprise! Whose fault do you think it is now, hm, Professor Pills?" 'You're not the only one capable for butchering names' "You really think they would've said anything if it weren't for me?"

For a moment, the ghost seemed to darken. Literally.

"Thought so," Harry grinned with mocking amusement while gesturing his peers to get the hell out of here.

The door opened with a bang and Flitwick entered, Hannah at his heels.

With his eyes opened wide, the Charms professor noticed the Hufflepuffs crowded at the back of the classroom with the exception of Mr Potter whose back was facing the windows, never lowering his gaze from the ghost looming over him.

"Nashòr, pià!" the boy exclaimed.

Pià, the ghost cage? That only worked when no living being but the caster was in the same room. He looked at Mr Potter who nodded firmly.

"Get out, children! Now!" he ordered them resolutely.

"But... Harry!" Ms Bones protested, outraged.

"Trust me, Ms Bones. This is Mr Potter's idea."

Quicker than he'd thought possible, the scared children ran out.

What happened within the next split of a second was too fast for the experienced duellist to register. Somehow, the windows were pushed open and the eleven-year-old was no longer in sight.

"Harry!" he shouted in stunned horror, but somehow he remembered to draw the Runes of the Everlasting Cage and a white glimmer told him that it had worked. A moment later, he had final proof of the teacher's ill-intent because Binns wanted to follow the young Hufflepuff and winded up hitting an invisible wall.

"What?" the ghost asked, completely baffled. His face resembled much more his usual indifference than that look of insane rage.

"Something I wanted to do since you spoke first of the goblin rebellions," Flitwick said and flicked his wand. Rune Magic was the

first form of magic he'd ever learned, but wand magic allowed him variety in a way the Runes were incapable of. Within seconds, the cage shrunk to the size of a desk, reaching from the ceiling to the floor. Binns could only turn around, but nothing else.

As quickly as the short legs allowed him, Flitwick ran to the window and once he was there, he received the second shock in less than a minute.

The small boy was standing in between two of the three windows decorating the classroom. His only connections to the castle, preventing him from inevitable fall, were the window-ledges, which were a foot apart from each other. His back leaned against the stony wall of Hogwarts.

What truly astonished the older wizard wasn't the boy's position at all. It was the calm that came with it.

"Professor, be careful!"

Said professor just stared at the boy who could die, should he fall without magical aid.

"Binns!" Harry warned, impatient in the face of the half-goblin's astonishment.

"Don't worry about that," Flitwick said with his familiar, high voice. "I reduced the cage's size. He will not be able to hurt anybody in this position."

"That's possible?" the raven-haired boy asked with innocent interest.

Flitwick hardly ever had the wish to shake a student this badly.

"Mr Potter," he attempted to sound calm, but failed miserably for his voice shook, "will you please, please come back inside again? As much as I enjoy talking about magic, I would prefer not to hold such a conversation this close to abyss."

At that, Harry shifted his weight slightly, looking down.

He didn't look scared, just careful.

Cautiously, Flitwick offered a helping hand, but he lacked in size to truly be of help. Before he could raise his wand however, Harry moved to the sill of the other window with cat-like agility and jumped into the classroom.

"How did you get out there so fast?" was all Flitwick managed to say, though it was the least of his questions.

"I..." a shadow clouded the boy's eyes before he continued. "I don't know. Dàio, nashòr," he added instantly.

"Don't mention it, Mr Potter. It must have been a bout of accidental magic. It happens, especially when underage wizards and witches are feeling scared, threatened or angry."

As if on cue, the door opened and Minerva McGonagall as well as the Astronomy teacher, Professor Sinistra, stood there with their wands lifted.

"Everything is under control," the Charms professor said serenely.

"What precisely is under control, Professor Flitwick?" Minerva asked tightly, her eyes flashing dangerously. "I've had two first-year Hufflepuffs nearly running in the door of my classroom, calling for help because 'Binns has gone loony.'"

"It seems as if Cuthbert doesn't accept the upcoming investigation of his teaching skills with the grace one would expect," Flitwick was unable to ban the venom from his voice.

He had warned Albus. He had told them that the ghost's temper was to be feared.

"What? Cuthbert!" while Minerva didn't like the History teacher very much, it seemed as if that was completely unexpected.

"You banish me from this castle because of this bunch of impolite, little cretins!" Binns hissed. He looked downright terrifying.

"There wasn't a word of banishment!" Minerva said with steel in her voice, looking less terrifying but quite a bit more deadly than the ghost. "Investigation implies that your material will be looked at and surveyed concerning their entirety and truthfulness. If anything was

considered unsatisfying, you would have been urged to change that particular matter. Now, though..."

"Everything is under control!" Miss Abott was heard from outside the hall, cutting off Minerva efficiently.

"Excuse me, Professor," Miss Bones said, slipping past her, with Miss Abott right behind her. Minerva numbly moved aside, flabbergasted at the bluntness of the first-year Hufflepuff.

"You're fine!" Miss Bones exclaimed, and took Harry into an embrace that seemed to be more for her own comfort than his. As if she just wanted to make sure he was still there.

"Susan, I'm okay, don't worry," he said, which resulted in the girl holding him more firmly. "Breathing is a requirement, though," he added with a slight gasp. Instantly, Miss Bones let go. As if on cue, Mr Potter had now Miss Abott in her arms.

"That was some quick thinking you did there, Hannah," the boy stated quietly. "Thanks for getting Professor Flitwick."

With those words, Miss Bones joined them thereby initiating what the modern children of today called 'group hug.'

Minerva, having regained composure, said, "Well... Miss Bones, could you please get back to my class and ask Mr Percy Weasley to go and fetch Professor Dumbledore?"

"That is not necessary," the deep, serene voice of the headmaster appeared at the doorframe, Miss Perks not too far behind him. The poor girl looked pale.

"You're okay," she whispered as she stared at young Mr Potter, obviously relieved. Her lips quivered.

"I'm okay," Harry confirmed. Unlike the other two, she didn't embrace him, kept her distance.

Flitwick was so focused on his students; he missed Minerva's explanation of the situation. When he saw the anger in Albus' face, he knew that matters had been elucidated already.

"Cuthbert, is this how you treat your students when they criticise you?" disappointment and anger were a scary combination on the old wizard's face.

Binns opened his mouth to speak, but his eyes widened and he remained voiceless when he saw the Bloody Baron and Sir Nicholas floating through the wall.

"Ah," Albus exclaimed with a smile, "good of you to come. Sir Nicholas, Baron, could you please guard Professor Binns until further action is decided?"

"Of course, Headmaster," Sir Nicholas confirmed, while the Baron simply nodded.

"Who has been looking for them?" the Charms teacher heard Harry whisper.

"Justin. He said something about 'fighting fire with fire.'" Hannah answered, causing the small boy to snicker.

"Ernie is currently running towards the greenhouses to fetch Professor Sprout. Eloise, she... Merlin, we've got to inform Eloise! She's looking for Hagrid," Susan said.

"You guys are amazing!" Harry only said, with an amused shake of his head. He seemed positively impressed.

Flitwick could hear Dumbledore talking to a spitting and shouting Binns, but he didn't register a single word, his focus was on the children, who kept trying to reassure each other that they were fine. Lily's son asked Susan at least four times whether the ghost truly hadn't touched her.

A heavily breathing Mr Finch-Fletchley arrived, gasping the same question every kid had asked ever since they kept coming from all corners of the castle.

"How are you feeling?" Albus asked kindly, after turning his back on the History teacher. It was amazing how quickly the headmaster regained control, especially when facing children. To Flitwick's surprise, Harry tensed nevertheless, as if he'd very well noticed the headmaster's anger.

"We are all okay, sir," Susan confirmed, when she noticed that Harry didn't utter a single word.

The boy's head turned as if listening to a distant sound causing Flitwick to listen as well, but he was unable to hear anything.

No, wait! There it was: a faint, pounding noise of heavy feet far away.

As the noise grew louder, the others caught up on it as well. Everybody's eyes were at the door when Hagrid arrived, his crossbow in his hands.

"Where is that prune?" he said, looking outright dangerous when he was gazing about the room.

"All's safe, Hagrid," Harry said calmly, stepping forward and smiling happily at the large man's arrival. "Thanks for coming, though."

"Anytime, Harry. Yeh're feeling okay?" the gamekeeper asked, his black eyes looking worried.

Harry nodded before smiling a little mischievously - he had never seen Lily's son look like this - while gesturing towards the big crossbow in Hagrid's hands, "Heavily armed, hm?"

"Don't work 'gainst ghosts," Hagrid mumbled, obviously ashamed. "But was all I had with me." Harry only smiled fondly.

Then Professor Sprout, Mr Macmillan and Ms Midgen arrived, the two students with their wands at the ready. It looked undeniably adorable, but Flitwick bit back his laughter.

Just barely.

These first-year Hufflepuffs were a force to reckon with.

"I'm fine," Lily's son said before the question could be asked yet again.

"Well," Professor McGonagall said, taking in the situation, "that was some quick thinking you did here. For future reference, unless you are being attacked by several mountain trolls at once, keep in mind

that all of your teachers are very well trained to deal with dangerous situations. It is therefore unnecessary to summon the entire staff. Nevertheless, very well done! Five points each seems to be sufficient."

Thirty-five points in one day. That was certainly worth celebrating.

On the other hand, they mostly just looked agitated and exhausted at the same time.

Well, with the exception of Harry, who didn't seem to be distressed at all.

Professor Sprout as their Head of House spoke up, "Well done, children. Why don't you come with me?" then she looked at Albus with her good-natured, round face, "With your permission, Headmaster, I would like to reschedule my lesson this afternoon... It's my NEWT class, they will gladly come by on Saturday... For I would like to spend some time with my First Years after such a frightening experience."

"Of course, Pomona," Albus gave his permission immediately.

"Yes," Hagrid said, "And I will... Go."

"Come with us, Hagrid!" Hannah said, smiling open-heartedly. "Half of the way is the same anyway."

What followed was an impressive amount of 'goodbyes', 'Yes, I am alright' affirmations and 'good afternoons' before the children, Pomona and Hagrid finally were ready to leave.

"Nakrìl, Kuòl y Ashîn!" Harry said quietly, bowing respectfully 'student to teacher.'

Conquerer of the Ghost? Really?

"Nakrìl, Sracùl," he replied.

It provoked an amused smile.

"Not a lizard, teacher," Harry whispered in Gobbledegook, making sure no one else heard him. "Thanks again. I am in your debt."

"Never, Master Potter," he replied. It felt good to speak Gobbledegook so freely, "You are a student at this school. I am a teacher. Protecting you is my primary goal."

Slowly, the little boy nodded, as if this was a new custom he'd have to get used to.

They bowed to each other and Harry left the classroom.

A/N: FINALLY. For all those who were patient enough to stick with this story for so long, but warned me about the slow pace: Pace quickens now and the chapters will shorten (not the updates, but the chapters).

I know that I stretched the Harry's first week quite excessively to the point the plot almost seemed to stand still. What I intended to do with that, was to introduce the most important characters, to a certain point their motivation, interests, views and the beginning of their interaction with each other.

For example, I wanted Harry to learn that his abilities aren't common and I couldn't let that happen three months later. The same goes with his suspicion towards Quirrell.

Anyway, I know that I lost quite a few readers (and reviewers) due to the slow pace.

Therefore, thanks for all those who continued reading... And special thanks for all those who've been reviewing. Especially those who've been with me since the beginning and those who in retrospect reviewed every single chapter.

Also, I want to thank MissGoalie75 and goku90504 for taking a look at the chapter before I posted it. Although, in order to defend MissGoalie75's Beta-ing skills... She only had time to check a third of this chapter. The mistakes that come later are therefor mine, not hers :)

Note concerning this chapter: "Nyanya" means 'grandmother' in Swahili... That is according to the internet, but I can't know for sure. I don't speak that language.

Next Chapter: Secrets and Riddles

Chapter 12, Part One: Secrets and Riddles

Binns' assault and subsequent sacking nearly caused the school's grapevine to explode.

Flitwick's heroic arrival had somehow found its way into the legendary tale of those Firsties who had managed to free this castle of the most boring teacher to set foot in this castle. Harry had always known that a big assembly of people led to the most ridiculous tales, but what this school was capable of stunned the eleven-year-old. According to the gossip, there had been a fierce duel between the ghost and the Charms teacher, leading to Binns' ultimate defeat.

Harry couldn't help but laugh out loud when he heard two Fifth Years discussing that Flitwick had probably used Engorgio on himself because he normally wasn't six feet tall.

To Harry's great relief, while the Hufflepuff class was being discussed as a whole, specific names weren't mentioned at all. Susan's name was heard once or twice in the hall, especially when a few days after Binns' banishment from the school, her aunt made sure he would never go anywhere near the children ever again.

Harry was glad that Flitwick was the only person who had witnessed his jump out of the window. He'd taken a calculated risk, he'd done so before, but he knew how this looked to outsiders.

Grey had never looked at him the same way ever again.

He was glad that it had been the Charms professor, not only because he liked him but because Flitwick believed that Harry's escape route had been a bout of accidental magic. Emphasis was on 'accidental' and consequently not worth mentioning.

It was not as if Professor Flitwick would have fed the grapevine, but he might have mentioned it to his colleagues. And that would have led to questions.

His classmates hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary, though Harry was surprised by how much respect he'd earned as a direct result of his protective actions. Of course, his task at St Mary's was

the role of the protector; he'd taken this task within his first week at the orphanage and the kids thanked him accordingly, but this was different.

His classmates were Others still: in a crisis they looked for an adult. The episode with Binns had proved that. Anyway, he was surprised just how much the members of his class relied on each other.

He was indescribably grateful for that.

In fact, after that incident he'd started to feel very comfortable with his peers, much more so than at the beginning.

That day had even changed his relationship to Sally-Anne a bit. They couldn't call each other friends, but their interaction could be described as 'Look, I don't like you very much, but we have each other's backs when it gets dire.' There were certain topics, namely goblins, they avoided, but otherwise it changed the dynamics of the class a bit. Ernie and Justin spent a little more time with Susan, Eloise, Hannah and Harry, though Harry would have still been careful about calling them friends. He liked them, but they were more like 'peers' than actual friends. Susan, Eloise and Hannah were becoming friends, though.

The sacking of Binns had a fundamental effect on the school's daily life as well.

Of course, there was no substitute teacher available at such short notice, and while Professor Dumbledore was looking feverishly for a replacement, the rest of the staff had to fill in the gaps of the timetable for every student up to Fifth Year. Like this, it was the First Years who had Flitwick instead of History, the Second Years had Professor McGonagall, the Fourth Years had Harry's Head of House and the Fifth Years had additional lessons in their subject of choice. Those lessons would be compensated as soon as History was back on schedule. However, that thought wasn't exactly comforting for the third-year students because their History lessons had been replaced by Potions. According to Fred and George, this pretty much meant that they had to cut back severely on the practical jokes because if there was one teacher they didn't dare to play a prank on, it was Snape. Furthermore, the dramatically increased amount of homework prevented them from playing pranks on anybody else. Thus, the student body's time spent in detention was cut in half, for

the first time in three years reaching what once was considered normal detention time.

While the twins were suffering from 'prank withdrawal' as they called it, the Slytherins had proved their cunning ability by cautioning their entire house concerning Quirrell without alarming their Head of House (which was akin to a miracle, apparently) and without making the Defence teacher suspicious. They'd received help from a source Harry had not expected: Blaise told him a couple of days after setting things in motion that Flint and the entire Quidditch team had approached them, offering help. The only condition was that Harry was informed of their aid.

That saddened the eleven-year-old.

Sure, 'Threat for a threat' was a rule with the tendency to work this way. Nevertheless, he despised it. He had not intention of gaining allies through force because he didn't think of fear as a good motivator. Some of the worst people he knew tended to think that way. Sullivan, some coppers, some mobs (and judging by the fact that Voldemort's name was not spoken out of fear, his parents' murderer as well) used fear and violence to get what they wanted.

That alone was reason enough never to do that himself.

However, other than that he didn't enjoy seeing fear in another person's eyes, no matter what they'd done. And Flint's offences had not been nearly as severe as some he'd witnessed.

So, next time he'd eaten breakfast at the Slytherin table together with Hermione and his Slytherin friends, he walked by where Flint was sitting (who'd jumped a bit) and nodded with (what he hoped would be interpreted as) a grateful smile. The captain of his Quidditch team jerked his head in response, some of the fear leaving his eyes.

He'd been a bit too effective with his threat.

Apart from the students, he'd requested a spirit's help to watch over Quirrell. However, the reaction had been... surprising.

'No, no, no,' Peeves had whispered after Harry had tracked him down once again. Although, he had to admit that it was a lot harder

to do so, given that Hogwarts was now talking to the poltergeist again. In fact, the First Year Hufflepuff was convinced that he'd only found him because Peeves had wanted him to.

After an hour of playing Hide and Seek, hitting dead-ends he usually avoided blind-folded, Harry learned two things: that Peeves could somehow manipulate his ways of perception and that he was incredibly lucky that the chaos spirit seemed to view him as a friend. He shuddered at the thought what the poltergeist would be capable of otherwise. However, since he was his friend, Peeves allowed him to discover his presence after his urge to play was satisfied.

After hearing Harry's request for a little help concerning Quirrell, Peeves had given a strange refusal.

"No, no, no," he'd said. "'Tis forbidden, little badger. Forgive old Peeves, but 'tis forbidden to go near the two-faced one. Not doing it, no."

If that wasn't proof for the teacher's shadiness, Harry didn't know what was. If a chaos spirit was calling someone two-faced... This had to mean something. Especially if the other time Harry had heard of a forbidden place from Peeves semi-transparent lips, it had been Hell.

Harry had consciously decided not to involve the house-elves because loyalty was for them as important as honour was for a goblin. Surely, it would hurt them physically to work against one of the teachers.

Apart from Binns' departure, the students' subtle wariness concerning Quirrell, and a rather memorable flying lesson two days after Binn's attack on the Hufflepuffs, nothing much happened. Routines started to develop; Harry learned to deal with kids outside of his chosen circle, learned more about his friends, Wizarding society, wand magic and school in general.

There was just one tiny problem, a tiny little problem he'd discovered after reading Char's letter. He'd read it only once, but it seemed to have burned into his memory in a way he normally didn't experience when reading things.

It had begun harmless enough, with an affirmation that they were all fine and that Harry was 'an idiot for believin' you'd abandoned us like one of those heartless bastards who think that anythin' but death is good enough a reason to leave.' Apparently, Harry's situation wasn't the same and that he shouldn't ever dare to think so.

What truly troubled him had been Char's answer regarding Hell.

'Maybe it's the anniversary getting to you. I mean, you were here when Ma... Wasn't alone then, so it wasn't that bad, but it'll be four years soon, only coupla days left till the 25th. I got trouble sleeping, too. First time we're out and we're not together. Grey, Sara and Luke don't know, they arrived years later. So, I can't go to 'em. Wouldn't anyway, but still... You ain't here and I'm not there, so guess it's normal it troubles the both of us.

It's the day we met, though that was the only good thing happenin'. I know I won't sleep. So, it could be just nerves for you as well.'

It had slipped his mind. With all those changes happening, he hadn't really thought of the date.

He couldn't believe he forgot the date.

September 25, 1987.

Well, he hadn't forgotten. He'd just not realized that his time in Hell had begun four years ago.

25-09-87-24

Numbers he'd never forget.

Desperately, he clung to his left wrist, feeling his watch pressing painfully into skin.

Tomorrow was an anniversary he'd never be able to celebrate.

The worst day.

With the exception of Halloween 1981, of course, but he hadn't known of that date until two months ago.

If he thought about what happened, it had been less painful than some of the things happening in the years that followed. However, he'd been but seven...

Blimey, seven!

So bloody young. Younger than two third of St Mary's inhabitants.

Humiliated.

Sullivan had always thought little of them. However, the day of your arrival was when you were marked. Branded like cattle.

Harry shuddered while his right hand didn't let go of his left wrist.

25-09-87-24.

'Make it stop!' he thought desperately, swallowing twice and blinking hard to suppress the sob that was caught in his throat.

Usually, he felt rather comfortable in the dorms of the Hufflepuff basement. Today, it choked him. Quickly, but without making a sound, he ran out.

Out.

He had to get out.

For once, the walls were oppressing. Suffocating. If he couldn't have London's streets, he'd take the castle's grounds.

Everything was better than enclosed rooms.

He checked his watch (forcing himself to merely look at its face, not what was beneath the strap). It was midnight. Nobody was in the Common Room and no teacher was patrolling the corridors he chose. Once he stood in front of the large doors leading to freedom, he hesitated. The doors creaked and that would cause an echo through the quiet castle. He couldn't risk that.

'Please, let me out,' he silently begged the castle. 'I've got to get out of here.'

For a moment there was no reaction until the walls led him away from the doors. He complied, but hesitated when he saw that the castle seemed to be asking him to return to the Hufflepuff Basement.

'No, please. I just... I won't ask this of you every night... But tonight, just tonight! I can't stand it, I need air!'

The warmth changed and it seemed to soothe him, no longer leading him. And yet, the path was the same. Confused, Harry decided to follow, but he was alert.

Then he saw it. There was a pathway on the other side of the soothing wall. He touched the stone and bricks moved aside.

It was tiny, barely enough for him crawl through, but it was a way out.

He was frantic enough to try.

Five long minutes through darkness, nothing but the wall's warmth leading the way, he had yet to move some stony bricks and then, finally, he was free!

Like a drowning man out of dangerous water, Harry gasped for air. He hadn't known that air could smell so good.

The moon, almost full, illuminated the beautiful grounds. The glittering surface of the lake looked deceitfully innocent. Of course, Harry knew that his suspicion was only due to his fear of water, intensified by haunting nightmares, but he'd be damned before he went anywhere near this lake.

Especially not tonight.

The forest was forbidden, and since Harry had no experience with any forests whatsoever, he had no urge to go near it. He didn't want to approach Hagrid's hut either, in fear of waking the man.

He wanted to be alone. The only company he would have accepted was Char's.

Maybe Matt's presence wouldn't be too bad either, or any of the other kids that had lived there as long he did or longer without

shutting down. But they were all gone. They'd run away the night Hell had started to burn. The others were too young in the first place.

Harshly, he pressed his fist against his eyes until he felt dizzy. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't afford to be discovered.

He'd tried to prepare his friends by saying he didn't feel well three days ago. For anyone but Char and Kertak this was a clear warning that he wanted to be left alone. Instead of complying however, Hermione, Susan, Hannah, Eloise and Millicent seemed to have thought that it was their job to nurse him. Hermione had insisted on sending him to Madame Pomfrey and forced him to take a third helping with the soup (and Hermione couldn't be denied when she insisted on something. It was remarkable how persistent that girl was). Susan had halfway manoeuvred him to the hospital wing with the help of Hannah and Millicent.

Since Millicent was by far taller than he was they'd almost succeeded, but Theo had prevented it in the last minute by pointing out that Harry didn't even look sick.

Theo seemed to be suspecting something, but he didn't say it outright. Strangely enough (or not so strangely, if he thought about it), Neville seemed to sense something as well because he managed to convince Hermione that a forth helping of soup would do more harm than good.

Ron and Blaise didn't seem overly concerned. Inquiry after a male friend's health for something as ordinary as the sniffles wasn't exactly part of their vocabulary.

Today, he'd acted as if everything was alright. He dreaded what would come tomorrow (or rather, today). If they reacted with so much care and worry when he started to feel sick without even running a fever, what would they do when they saw him taciturn and quiet?

Harry wasn't a bad actor, he could lie well if necessary, but he already knew he'd fail today. He'd taken a lot of blows, swallowed everything life threw at him, but this date... this bloody, goddamn date managed to bring him at the verge of a meltdown.

25-09-87-24

Twenty-five, zero, nine, eighty-seven, twenty-four.

Bastard! Bastard! Bastard!

He couldn't take it anymore. He had to look at it. He'd bloody well refused to do so for months. But he had to see it.

Maybe it was just a dream, just a nightmare.

He believed it, those seconds he took off his watch, he actually believed that lie. That it was all but a dream.

Of course, it wasn't.

25-09-87-24

A number, burned into flesh. Marked forever.

Maybe that was why he pitied Laciús sometimes. It had to have hurt like hell when that curse hit him.

Harry remembered the pain he'd felt when the red-hot needle had touched his skin.

Neck. Wrist. Ankle.

Neck for the leaders, ten years or older. Wrist for the potential troublemakers. Ankle for the rest.

One could say whatever they wanted about Sullivan. He'd been able to read people. Every single kid whose neck had been marked, belonged to those who'd run away that night. With the exception of Tina for she'd been marked like Harry.

The wrist.

Sullivan had known how to control him as well.

'You tell anyone, I'll kill them.'

'Not telling' included any kind of resistance. Harry had given Sullivan a hard time, but he'd always managed to avoid having him carry out that threat.

His hands shook as he tried to put on his watch again. When he ran his hand over his face, he noticed with dismay that his cheeks were wet with salty tears.

He was so tired.

"Damn it, Char! I wish you were here," he whispered into the night and a sob escaped him before he could stop it.

'Get yourself a grip!' he reprimanded himself.

He had to go to sleep. But where?

'If the shelter's gone, or too far away,' Sully used to say, 'don't you sleep in an open street. Find shelter that is safe and sound, from where you can safely watch the crowd. A dump, a cardboard box, a little hole, disappear beneath the earth like a mole. Don't you sleep in an open street.'

Harry had never quite understood why this one rule sounded more like a rhyme than any other rule he'd learned. Maybe because it was so important for a small kid like he'd been, or maybe because it was a rule you forgot easily when you grew tired. Anyhow, it had stuck and he obeyed.

As always.

He walked back to the small pathway he'd used to climb out and let the wall go down in a way he could lie in there with his feet touching the castle's bricks and his head right by the exit.

Sleep was light if it came at all.

While living at St Mary's, he'd felt safe rather quickly and the lack of noise, noise that was usually heard in London's centre, hadn't bothered him so much.

Especially since they were still in London, just at a quieter location.

However, the grounds were loud. Surely, there wasn't the sound of cars nearby, or the howling of a siren, but nature seemed to have a background noise of its own. Every other second, Harry was startled by an owl or by the sounds of animals he couldn't identify.

When he heard voices from the forest that reminded him marginally of humans, he had enough.

Better feeling suffocated by the walls of Hogwarts than being eaten by something from the forest, or the water.

His way back was thankfully as uneventful as his way outside. When he curled himself into a ball beneath the warm sheets of his bed, it was two o'clock. When he finally fell asleep, it was four.

Ernie and Justin woke him up at seven.

He took his time to get ready, carefully avoiding any kind of human interaction, but he couldn't think of a good reason to skip breakfast, especially after encountering Hannah in the Common room. Like this, he ended up at the Hufflepuff table, accompanied by his classmates, Blaise, Millicent and Theo.

"Morning, Jòsef," Blaise grinned. The young Slytherin had been frequently calling him by the first name of the famous Seeker Wronski, because rumours regarding his flying talent had spread fast after the first lesson nearly two weeks ago. Hadn't Hufflepuff already put together its team, Harry most likely would have been offered a spot. As it was, he was only a first-year and they weren't allowed to become part of the House Team, if at all as a substitute player. Many had urged him to apply for a spot next year.

Normally, he accepted the compliments and the slight teasing with a smile, but September twenty-fifth was anything but normal.

"Not today, Blaise. Please."

His quiet request had the effect he was dreading.

"Are you okay?" Millicent was the first to ask the hated question. Several pairs of worried eyes looked at him.

"Fine," his voice sounded hoarse and strained, wholly unconvincing.

"Right," was Millicent's sarcastic reply. "Seriously, though. What's up?"

"Nothing... Bad day, restless night. I won't be cheerful company today, I'm afraid. Sorry, people. Just don't take it personally and lea..." He stopped himself just in time, which kept him from saying 'leave me alone' right into their faces.

He knew they weren't responsible, the last thing he wanted was to lash out, but his patience was wearing out quickly already, all due to an innocent question... He shouldn't have left the bed.

"We got Flitwick and Sprout today, right?" Theo asked Millicent and Harry felt a wave of gratitude for his quiet friend.

"Yeah," Millicent answered. She understood subtleties well and decided to let it slide. For now. "You?" she asked Susan.

"Double lesson Defence and Professor McGonagall," the red-haired girl said, looking worriedly at Harry.

The emerald-eyed boy's face fell; only barely he managed to stifle a groan.

Of all classes, it just had to be Defence Against the Dark Arts today. What else could it possibly be?

.....

Half an hour later, the First Year Hufflepuffs sat inside of Quirrell's classroom. His friends sensed that something was going on they didn't understand and they did their best to follow Harry's wishes by leaving him alone.

Harry was tense the second the wizard entered the room and it only got worse as the minutes crept by. He was trembling by the time the first lesson ended.

He couldn't get out, he knew that. Quirrell was dangerous and he had no intention of leaving his friends alone with a man whose intentions and actions he couldn't read. That didn't make things

easier. Whenever Quirrell turned his back on him, he wanted to run; whenever he looked at him he had the wish to turn invisible.

'Hold still, you little pest! If I hear one more sound, you'll wish you'd never been born!' Sullivan's deep, aggressive voice cut through the wails of the frightened children as he grabbed the ten-year-old boy's ankle to continue his work. He shoved him away and grabbed Kyle next. Harry moved forward, but caught himself just in time.

The boy, who'd just been marked, whimpered.

'Ma! Mummy!' he cried in pain and grief. Harry saw the man's fingers tightening around the needle and Kyle screamed when it touched his skin. Quickly, he made his way to the crying boy.

'It's okay,' Harry soothed him, murmuring quietly. 'It's going to be fine. What's your name?'

'Richard,' the older boy mumbled.

'Boy! You!' the tall man shouted, looking at Harry. 'Come here! Hold out your wrist and don't you make a fucking sound!'

With a gasp, Harry shook off the images.

Not again! What was it about this classroom that made Harry remember things he'd much rather forget?

"Sp-Sp-Spiders ag-again, Mr P-P-Potter?" Quirrell asked as he turned around and Harry could have sworn there was a maliciously amused glimmer in his eyes.

"I'm fine, sir," he forced himself to say calmly. "I apologize."

The rest of the lesson Harry spent staring at his empty piece of parchment; his right hand was gripping the quill painfully. He avoided looking at Quirrell at all cost, and wondered, not for the first time, what it was about the Defence teacher that made him this jumpy.

The moment they were dismissed, Harry had packed his stuff and approached Susan who flinched.

"Merlin, Harry! Don't startle me like this." She hadn't heard him coming, but Harry didn't voice an apology for once.

"I'm skipping the next lesson, Susan," he stated in a voice that booked no room for argument. "Can you cover for me?"

"Sure, I'll tell her you were feeling unwell, but, Harry, please, what's going on?" her voice was full of worry, but Harry wanted to scream.

"Please, Susan, just do me this favour. I'll tell you tonight, but for now I'm asking you to leave it."

"Okay," her voice didn't sound any less worried than before, probably even more so, however she obviously saw her friend's grave expression and decided to let it be.

For now.

Harry slipped away before he had to talk to anybody else. He knew this would get him into trouble, but he couldn't even think of going back to class anymore. He just wanted to get out.

He wasn't able to go too far, though.

Argus Filch, a man whose unpleasant company he'd been able to avoid so far, was standing in the way.

"Where do you think you're going, boy?" he asked grimly.

"Outside," Harry replied, breathing deeply to keep his calm.

"You are supposed to be in class, boy!" he hissed.

'Call me 'boy' one more time, you miserable old man, and you'll regret it.'

"I wasn't feeling well... Sir," he added, but his voice sounded strained and insincere. Harry officially declared himself a bloody fool.

"You come with me, boy!" Filch said, with a quick jerk of his hand he tried to grab Harry's neck. The eleven-year-old had switched position long before Filch was near enough to close his hand.

"Fine, I'll come, but if you touch me..." "I'll break every single one of your fingers..." "I'll scream."

"Magic!" Filch spat as he whirled around to face the underage wizard.

"Well, if you're working at a school for 'Witchcraft and Wizardry' you kind of have to expect such encounters," Harry shot back, deadpanned. He had no patience for that. Not today.

Filch growled, but it seemed as if Harry's eyes had spoken truer than his lips. The housekeeper had seen the warning on the boy's face. He stalked towards the dungeons without leaving the young wizard out of sight.

"Why are we going towards the dungeons?"

It took him a moment to read Filch's surprised gaze correctly: they were taking a short-cut that didn't seem to be used frequently.

"You are one of those whiny little brats from Hufflepuff," he hissed coolly. "Your Head of House is all cuddly. Won't do much good with a little troublemaker like you, Potter! He'll know better how to deal with you."

Harry wondered about Filch's obvious hostility. He'd never as much as talked to that man. Why would he be thinking that he was a troublemaker? How come he knew his name? Then a brief thought crossed his mind and the distraction was so welcome, he jumped on it like grabbing for a lifeline.

"Have you already been here when my father went to school?"

Filch spat, "Your father. Yes, I knew your father, alright. Scoundrel he was, a little troublemaker. He and his friends." There was so much venom in the man's voice, Harry was taken aback. "But the professor won't let that happen. He won't allow you roaming around like your father. The deputy headmistress did allow it, she'd do it again. The Sprout woman is just too damn soft. Not him, though. Came to me sometimes, giving hints where the scallywags would be causing mayhem next. He will make sure you don't start any trouble."

So, Professor Snape had known his father at school. Judging by the age, they'd been going to school together, maybe even the same year. And Snape had hated James Potter. It explained the edge that was to Harry's last name on their first lesson.

It angered the eleven-year-old. He wasn't his father! And Snape had been ready to hate him for it.

'He came round, though,' his rational voice reminded him gently. However, the part of him that wanted to fight so desperately couldn't care less.

Harry was looking for a scapegoat. He knew that.

He needed someone to scream at and, because neither Sullivan nor Cline was in immediate proximity, Snape suddenly seemed like a wonderful target.

Sure, Filch irritated him more, but that man was just pitiful. It wasn't Harry's way to wilfully attack people weaker than him. On the contrary, when he had to let off some steam, Harry had the dangerous tendency to look for a stronger opponent than he was.

Sullivan, Blade, coppers... It hardly ever ended well, but so far he'd always stayed alive.

Here, it had to be a teacher on the receiving end. However, which one?

He liked Flitwick, and he had no reason to lash out on neither his Head of House nor Professor McGonagall. Quirrell was too much of a question mark. Binns was no longer inside the walls of this castle. He had no particular opinion of Professor Sinistra whatsoever. Professor Dumbledore was out of question.

It left Professor Snape. He'd be on the receiving end for something that wasn't his fault.

For a second Harry was disgusted with himself, but he'd never claimed himself to be saint. And he had to lose this nauseating pressure inside of his gut somehow.

Snape was the only person Harry thought was strong enough to put him back in place. Without outright harming him in the process.

He hoped.

He knew he was about to tickle a sleeping dragon. Because he had the dark feeling that Snape wouldn't take it too kindly when a student's temper flared.

Rather tickle a sleeping dragon than hurting a friend, though. And that was the alternative.

Without having truly noticed it, Harry stood in front of the Potions classroom and Filch knocked briskly.

A/N: Wow. Wow... I mean, wow! I'm speechless. One hundred and thirty-nine reviews for that last chapter! Thank you so much for the support. This is amazing.

Special thanks to MissGoalie75 and goku90504 for beta-ing this chapter.

Some people asked me about the flying lessons... Originally, I planned to describe it in detail for the chapter "Down to Earth, Up in the Air". But then, plans changed. If enough people are interested in a tag for that particular day, I'll write it.

Please, continue to review so faithfully. It motivates me to continue writing.

Note for this chapter (Part 1 and 2): It's angsty, I know. This date deeply affected Harry. He won't drown in self-pity, though. Don't worry. It's just this particular day when memories are too close to the surface for him to cope with them as well as he usually does. The poor kid is just eleven after all. Cut him some slack before you review :)

Chapter 12, Part Two: Secrets and Riddles

"Enter!" Snape's tone indicated that he wasn't too happy with the interruption. Filch opened the door and reached back to grab Harry, but the eleven-year-old ducked and stepped inside.

With a quick glance, he surveyed the room. Snape was teaching the Gryffindor and Slytherin fifth-years. Harry saw Gabriela Cornell, Percy Weasley, Flint and some of the other teenagers who'd threatened him in his first week. The Slytherin Prefect tilted her head sideways, seemingly confused. She remembered him, but Harry could see that she had troubles attaching his face to a name or memory. Percy and Flint recognized him instantly, though. The red-haired Gryffindor's lips pursed a little, the Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team just stared.

"Mr Filch, Mr Potter... Is there a specific reason for interrupting my lesson?" Snape sounded as severe as ever. It was impossible to fathom what he thought.

"The boy tried to sneak out," Filch explained maliciously. "He's got class, but he didn't follow his peers."

"As you can see, Mr Filch, this is a class for fifth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins. And since I can't grasp why Mr Potter should decide to flee into the dungeons in order to avoid class, I must ask you why you would have thought it necessary to bring him here. He doesn't belong to my House and he didn't forego my lesson." Mild annoyance crept into the Potions Master's voice.

Filch was taken aback. He'd obviously expected Snape to jump at the opportunity of disciplining Harry. For a moment, there was silence.

Against all odds, Harry felt some of his anger shift into malicious joy for Filch's humiliating position.

He couldn't help but grin, "From what I gathered, he believes that neither Professor Sprout nor Professor McGonagall is capable of handling me."

"I see." The professor's face was blank.

"He's a scoundrel!" Filch exclaimed. "You, of all people, know that!"

"So far, Mr Potter hasn't lost a single point for breaking any rule. What observation has led to your estimation?" Snape asked casually, not really expecting a real answer.

Filch's mouth opened and closed without uttering a sound.

"Apparently, he firmly believes that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree," Harry said, dead-panned.

Snape's indifferent mask cracked a little. His black eyes captured emerald with a dark, intense gaze.

"Well," the Potions professor said after a moment, "since you are already here, Mr Potter... would you tell me why you didn't follow your peers?"

"Yes, I could," Harry answered, but offering nothing more. He hoped to provoke Snape.

It worked.

Snape stiffened almost imperceptibly. For a moment, his entire demeanour darkened and his lips tightened.

Then it was over.

The wizard's features lost some of their coldness. For a moment, there was the flicker of an emotion on the wizard's face that Harry couldn't place. Then, the man's face was void of all feeling.

It made him feel uneasy.

"Thank you, Mr Filch. I'll take it from here," Snape said quietly.

Filch wasn't happy with the teacher's reaction, "But..."

"I said I'll take it from here. As you've undoubtedly expected me to." There was a dangerous undertone in his voice, and Harry suddenly felt nervous. Why was he convinced that Snape was the right person to scream at, again?

Filch wasn't a simpleton. He quickly stepped back, thereby jostling Harry.

Harry couldn't say if it was done intentionally or happened accidentally. All he registered was that he nearly lost balance because of an ill-tempered, adult man.

His tension unloaded within the blink of an eye.

"Don't touch me!" he shouted, stepped aside and pushed sharply.

Filch slammed into the doorframe, almost losing consciousness.

Chaos unleashed.

Flint jumped from his seat and almost collided with the cauldron behind him, hadn't his partner grabbed his shoulders in time.

Filch recovered quickly from his near fall and charged.

"You little...!"

His original plan forgotten, Harry turned towards Filch, ready to fight.

"Enough!" Snape cried sharply.

Filch realized instantly what he'd almost done: attacking a student was unacceptable. The headmaster had very little tolerance for it. No matter how much they deserved it in the housekeeper's opinion. He drew back.

Harry didn't.

He stepped forward, only to face a cloak as black as its bearer's hair. The boy looked up to face indecipherable eyes.

"Mr Potter, violence is an offence that is taken very seriously at Hogwarts," Snape said. His voice was tense and quiet. Harry couldn't tell for sure if the class had heard him.

"Well, sir," Harry murmured just as quietly, "since I'm already in trouble, why not make it worthwhile?"

He'd already attacked. There was no turning back. His lips quivered slightly at the thought that this one, entirely reflexive, movement might have cost his entire future at Hogwarts.

"No, Mr Potter. You would only be in trouble if you attacked again," the teacher contradicted, even lower than before.

Then, louder, so the class could hear him: "Mr Flint, please see Mr Potter to my office. You may remain with him until the end of the lesson."

The captain of the Quidditch team didn't move a muscle. Harry's confused gaze caught his and the older boy shook his head brusquely.

"Mr Pucey then, please." The words indicated that it was a request. The tone didn't. The kid who'd prevented Flint's collision with a cauldron stood up, packed his bag and approached the three people who were standing in the doorway.

Meanwhile, Filch and Snape exchanged heated words, but Harry couldn't hear what they said. And he stood right next to them! This had to be some kind of magic, but Harry hadn't felt or heard anything.

"Come on, kid," Mr Pucey said briskly once he was in front of Harry.

The argument between Filch and Snape ended and the housekeeper left, his entire body language screaming that he'd lost whatever they'd been arguing about.

Snape looked at the teenage boy called Pucey, "Thank you. If you have question concerning the potion, you may come to me any time."

"Professor," Percy Weasley spoke up, "don't you think it'd be better if a prefect..."

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr Weasley, for questioning my authority in class," Snape said lazily without as much as looking towards the Gryffindor prefect. It was obvious what he thought of that particular House. Harry wasn't blind: he'd seen that in class. Without the help of his brother, Neville would have a horrible time at

Potions because Snape dealt rather harshly with timid, clumsy students. Also, the overstepping of boundaries led to greater consequences if you were a Lion. It irked Harry, but so far, it hadn't been excessive. He'd heard however that the upper classes, where the Lions and Snakes were in the same room during Potions, it was rather bad sometimes. This was the first time for Harry to actually witness it.

Percy looked surprised and embarrassed at the loss of points.

"Sir, that's unfair!" a Gryffindor whose name Harry didn't know, complained. "It was a valid question!"

Snape's bored expression turned into a sneer, "Thank you, Mr Pratt, for this unnecessary complaint. Another ten points from Gryffindor.

At that, a third person opened his mouth to protest. He couldn't even utter a sound before Snape grew tired of it, "And yet another ten points. The next person to protest will be cleaning cauldrons for the rest of the week. Mr Potter, Mr Pucey, leave my classroom! I will not repeat myself."

Pucey had the mental capacity not to grab Harry's shoulder. Or touch him in any way. He merely shushed him out.

"What's your damage?" the older kid asked as soon as they were outside.

Harry rolled his eyes. If Pucey thought that this would make him talk, he was fooling himself.

"Bugger off!" he grumbled. The tone he used surprised even him. He hadn't spoken like this since before Hell. It was the tone you used when you wanted a fight.

Pucey hissed, "Oh, don't you dare come at me like this, kid! Seriously, Filch and Snape? Snape? Do you want to go to the dragons?" Harry almost laughed bitterly for he'd used the same comparison only minutes before. "I mean, come on! How stupid can you be?"

"I know what I'm doing..." Harry started, but was interrupted.

"Oh, please!"

The Hufflepuff gritted his teeth at the insolence. But then he had to admit that he hadn't exactly followed the formalities of goblins either.

More like the formalities of a mobster looking for trouble.

Pucey continued, "If you knew you'd have kept your mouth shut, kid! What's your first name, anyway? I don't want to keep calling you 'kid'."

Harry just looked at him as they walked the main corridor of the dungeons.

The Fifth Year just rolled his eyes in exasperation, "Name's Adrian Pucey. What's yours? And what, in the name of Merlin, have you done to Flint... or Filch, while we're at it?"

"Harry. My last name you know," Harry replied evenly. "As for what I did... none of your business."

"Oh, I think it is," Pucey disagreed. "He's my captain. If you got him this scared, you could influence his game. That's unacceptable as well as my business."

"Quidditch, really?" Harry sneered. "And you weren't part of the 'let's scare and threaten an eleven-year-old' commando, why?" he asked sardonically.

"I'm not an enthusiastic supporter of a certain mentality that is called 'rule by force'... Wait, that was you? You befriended some of the Fledglings, didn't you? They even eat at the Gryffindor table every once in a while."

"That's me."

Adrian stood still, causing Harry to stop as well. The teenager looked worried all of a sudden.

"Okay, what's up?"

Harry tilted his head, trying to follow, "I'm sorry?"

"I don't know you, but I've heard enough about you to know that you aren't some angry kid. What's going on?"

The orphan didn't like the way this conversation was going. "It doesn't concern you. Why bother?" he hissed.

"I bother because my Head of House just condemned me to accompany you into his office and remain with you until the lesson is over," the Slytherin fifth-year answered.

"He never said the last part," Harry reminded him.

What he received was a scoff, "Right. I'm going to leave a student who seems angry enough to take on Professor Snape alone in said teacher's office." He set into motion again, making sure Harry followed him. "I'm not suicidal. Which is more than I can say of you...so, yes! I think it concerns me."

"I'm not going to destroy his office. Not matter what you believe, I'm not that crazy," Harry said.

He didn't know what to think. Nothing was going the way he'd expected or planned it.

"You could have fooled me," Adrian hissed. "I can't remember the last time someone provoked Snape outright." He shook his head and took another turn into a smaller corridor.

Pucey was tall, lean, but his build indicated that he would gain some muscle in upcoming years, once he slipped into adulthood. His hair was light brown, while his eyes were dark.

While Harry had followed the teenager without question, he was as attentive as ever.

Every turn, every corridor he examined, looking for signs of a warning. This part of the dungeons he'd never seen before, but he trusted Hogwarts not to let him walk into a trap. He didn't trust Adrian as much. While he didn't seem to be malicious, the Hufflepuff first-year wasn't ready to take chances.

Not today.

"Do you want him to despise you? Because I can tell you, you're doing an excellent job so far," Adrian continued.

Harry ran out of what little patience he'd left.

"Quit it with the good advice and insincere interest in my life! What do I have to say to make you shut up?" he was being petty, but frankly he didn't care.

To his surprise, Adrian laughed good-naturedly, "If I had received a knut every time someone asked me that, I'd be able to buy the new Nimbus 2000."

Although Harry wondered briefly what a Nimbus 2000 was, he wasn't able to suppress a grin.

A kindred spirit.

Harry too was accused of being too persistent quite often at home.

"I can't tell you," he then said quietly and a lot softer compared to the way he'd spoken to Adrian before. If the older teenager was surprised at the change of tone, he didn't say anything.

"That's acceptable for now," he simply said.

"What are you?" Harry asked without feeling annoyed. "A bloody shrink?"

"What's a shrink?" Adrian asked, interest peaked.

"Psychiatrists. Doctors who deal with a person's mind." The raven-haired boy wasn't sure if that explanation was enough, but the Quidditch player's face lit up at the word 'psychiatrist.'

"That's what I want to be," he exclaimed, smiling. "Well, a mind healer, that's the Wizarding World's equivalent for it."

"Really?" Harry avoided shrinks for the same reason he avoided doctors. He remembered the first week after the burn-down, when both he and Char, feeling on edge already, had done everything in their power not to be locked in again. He'd never lied as much as in that particular week.

"Yes," the Fifth Year answered, unaware of the younger kid's train of thought. "I want to be the best there is."

Good, safe topic.

"Slytherin ambition," Harry grinned. Then his thoughts drifted to those kids who couldn't be helped with mere means of non-magical psychology, "What's the difference between psychology and mind healing?"

If the topic confused the fifteen-year-old, he didn't show it. In fact, he seemed right out enthusiastic at the idea of talking about his choice of profession. And he seemed to know a whole lot about it.

"Well, it's obviously the use of magic. For example, while some Muggles use hypnosis in some cases, it doesn't have the same significance... Stop, the professor's office is behind this door!" he interrupted himself. He opened the door and they entered a shadowy room that held shelves with hundreds of glass jars in which rested ingredients and fully brewed potions. There was also a cupboard in a corner. The desk was made of a dark wood that dimmed the room's light even further. The jars fit the Potions Master as well as the gloomy atmosphere. It didn't exactly make Harry feel at home, though.

Adrian closed the door and Harry's tension was back to a certain degree.

"Where was I?" the older student said thoughtfully, oblivious. "Ah, yes...hypnosis. It's a major aspect of mind healing. The subconscious is a lot easier to access if you have magic at your disposal." Harry seriously hoped Adrian didn't think of exploring his subconscious.

As if guessing what he was thinking, the Slytherin Quidditch player continued, "Of course, it takes ten years of education before you reach a level that allows you to treat patients."

"This access... How does it work?"

"Oh, it's a rather obscure branch of magic. It's not taught at Hogwarts and to receive permission to perform it on another person is very hard. It's called 'Legilimency.'"

"So, that allows you to manipulate a person's mind?" he was horrified at the thought.

"Not really. You'd have to be extraordinarily powerful to be capable of doing that. Basic Legilimency allows you to see bits and pieces of a person's memories. It's very important to be careful with that because a traumatized person can suffer from horrible flashbacks."

Harry's thoughts drifted to the Defence lesson earlier and shuddered. Was Quirrell using Legilimency without their knowledge?

"Hey, kid!" Adrian said soothingly. "No need to worry. A mind healer first completes six years of education as a healer and another four to study the means of mind healing. Legilimency is only in the last two years of said education. So, you're safe for the next thirteen years." He grinned when saying the last part before stating seriously, "We are asked to swear an oath never to abuse this power anyway. Don't worry."

"Why become a mind healer?"

Harry could think of a few reasons. Most of which had to do with Paul, Nicholas and all the others who'd shut down.

"I'm sure you've heard of some Muggle sickness that messes with the mind: personality disorder and the likes. Hearing voices..." Harry nodded.

Adrian saw him nod and continued, "What isn't generally known is that magic can mess with the mind as well. That is what interests me."

That wasn't all and Harry wasn't in the mood to talk around it.

"'Doctor, heal thyself', hm?"

If Adrian was surprised at Harry's comment he didn't show it, "My older brother has spent the last twelve years at St Mungo's because of that, yes."

He looked away and Harry felt a pang of compassion.

"You're a good brother," he said genuinely. Emerald met brown and Adrian smiled sadly.

"Thanks," the fifteen-year-old replied. "So, what about you?"

Harry couldn't help but laugh, "Doesn't work that way, Adrian. Sorry."

The Quidditch player chuckled, "It was worth a try. Tell me one thing, though."

"Depends," he responded vaguely.

"What did you do to Filch?"

"I'm eleven years old," Harry evaded carefully. "What makes you think I did something?"

"A cousin of mine is eight. Turned her father into a man-sized guinea pig a few months ago."

"Accidentally?" Harry laughed.

"That's the big question, isn't it? She later said that she wanted to make a rabbit, but hadn't known about the ears," the brown-haired boy smiled.

"Well, sure, they are difficult, you know," was the Hufflepuff's sarcastic reply.

"Definitely," Pucey smirked. "We call it accidental magic, but ultimately, it tells us a lot about a person's power."

"Is it family thing? Magical power, I mean?"

"Professor Dumbledore is the perfect example that power inspires both, genius and insanity. Does that answer your question?"

"My experience with power is that true power's to have it, not to use it," Harry stated firmly.

"Bullocks! Don't ever mistake abuse for use. Power shouldn't ever be abused, but using it? Why not?" Adrian spoke with so much conviction, Harry didn't know how to reply.

Meanwhile, the teenager continued, "Anyway, if, according to you, power shouldn't be used at all... How come Filch made close acquaintance with a doorframe and Flint is terrified enough of you to forget all precautions in a Potions classroom?"

"Flint left me no choice," the eleven-year-old said, gritting his teeth. "I always meet a threat with a threat. I just happen to be more efficient than he is. As for Filch..." Harry sighed. "Normally, I'd just ignore him. His bark is worse than his bite. I'm just having a very bad day."

"Ah," Adrian nodded thoughtfully. Then he lifted his eyebrows, "Do me a favour? Next time you're having a bad day, warn me first, so I can run in another direction."

Harry smirked, "Sure."

The rest of the lesson, they spent either in companionable silence or casual small talk. Quidditch was a main topic. Harry hadn't heard much of the sport before Hogwarts. Kertak wasn't interested and Harry hadn't been very interested either. The students made it sound exciting, though.

And so it was that Harry was a lot calmer when the office door opened.

"Thank you, Mr Pucey," Snape said quietly as he entered. "You may leave."

"You're welcome, sir." With a genuine smile he looked at the younger boy, "It was a pleasure meeting you."

All of a sudden, he caught his Head's gaze, "Sir, I know what it seemed like. Don't..."

"I believe myself capable of judging for myself, Mr Pucey. It's time for you to eat lunch." His face didn't portray the slightest flicker of emotion.

Harry gulped visibly.

Adrian seemed to be feeling uneasy as well because he left the office fairly quickly, only with a last, sympathetic look at Harry and a goodbye to them both.

There was silence after the door closed. Harry thought it best not to speak first. Snape walked past him and sat on the chair behind his desk. Obviously waiting patiently for Harry to talk, he rearranged some of the papers and books that covered the edges of his desk.

Harry had no intention to offer anything. He didn't dare testing the door either. He already had the feeling of being locked in. There was no need to confirm it.

"The door isn't locked, Mr Potter," Snape said calmly, as if reading his mind. "But I strongly suggest you to stay."

"How did you...?" What if the man had used the Legili-thing?

"You've glanced at the door about ten times within three seconds, Mr Potter. It doesn't take a genius to estimate your thoughts," the adult wizard said casually. A moment later, he shook his head slightly, "I don't care much for evasion. Tell me what the matter is."

"I have no intention to, sir. It was Mr Filch who brought me here. It's not as if I wanted to talk."

"I think you've demonstrated plainly that the housekeeper is incapable of forcing you to do anything you don't want to. So, let me rephrase: Why come to me?"

He was far too perceptive. Once again, he'd managed to strip Harry off his defences. The wizard's words only allowed two possibilities for Harry: absolute truth or lie. Nothing in between. While lying was tempting, Snape would see right through him.

"I was angry, sir. Things happen when I'm angry. I couldn't risk hurting my friends. You..." He didn't know how to continue. All he could do was shrugging his shoulders.

"Don't do that, Mr Potter. It is highly impertinent," the Potions Master reprimanded him. Then, his voice changed, sounding softer, "What you have tried to do was very foolish and dangerous."

Harry smiled sardonically, showing plainly that he agreed.

"While it's admirable of you to avoid hurting your friends, next time you might consider punching a wall. It is much safer," Snape suggested and Harry cringed slightly. The last thing he wanted was punching a wall. It had taken him a month until that particular block of flats had acknowledged his existence after doing just that.

"Why were you... are you angry? As talented as Mr Pucey is at calming agitated spirits, I can't imagine that the anger has disappeared completely already."

Harry was amazed by the man's obvious confidence, arrogance even. He spoke as if he was never wrong.

Well, in this case he wasn't, but still...

"He didn't mean to calm me down at first," Harry stated, avoiding the original question.

"Let me guess," the Potions Master's lips perked up slightly. "He accused you of being a dunderhead for challenging me and by the end of your discussion you indulged in small talk. He has been a student of mine for the past five years... Mr Potter," he added as an afterthought. "I know what to expect."

The arrogance annoyed Harry, "Sure, that's why Flint was your first choice."

"Careful, Potter. You are trying my patience," Snape warned, his eyes glimmered dangerously. "As for Mr Flint, I wanted to see if he truly was afraid of you. He is."

"He'll appreciate being your test subject, sir," Harry attacked instantly.

The quill Snape had held in his hand broke in two pieces. It was a demonstration of how much patience Harry demanded of him. The wizard took a deep breath and looked right at Harry.

"I am certain you understand that I usually deal with Fifth Years bullying First Years into submission. Not the other way around. Forgive me for making..."

"Bully?" Harry exploded without warning. "He threatened me! He threatened my friends! You can't expect me to just stand by and do nothing about it!"

The small smirk on the teacher's pale face indicated that he'd just fallen head-on into a trap. Defeated, Harry pressed his lips together and looked away. It was a rare occurrence for him to be tricked like this and he didn't know whether or not to be angry about it.

"Will you ever tell me what is going on, Mr Potter?"

"Give me one reason that doesn't include the phrases 'adult', 'duty', 'for your own good', or 'care', sir, and I might."

"You seem to be worried about accidentally or intentionally hurting your friends. You haven't even come close to venting, so tell me." The words were spoken without hesitation. As if he'd planned on saying that at the very beginning.

Reflexively, Harry stood up and bowed 'student to teacher' followed by an honorary gesture that complimented the receiver's intellect.

He sighed. What could he say without exposing himself?

"Have you ever had a day when everything went wrong?" Harry asked serenely. "A day when the 'what if's' don't stop, no matter how many times you revise it?"

Snape stiffened considerably. He didn't say a word, but when his right hand enclosed his left arm tightly, Harry knew.

"It haunts us, doesn't it?" Harry continued. "It's just another anniversary, but not just... You know what I mean, sir?"

Snape didn't confirm, but he did.

"Another anniversary?" the older man asked instead.

He couldn't know about Hell. Harry knew that. The professor knew something happened, but he'd been far too calm during detention to actually know. Harry had met adults who knew, Sister Augustine for one: they tended to walk around him on eggshells at the beginning.

Besides, Harry could be talking about anything. There was no harm in telling.

"Fourth."

A second later, he wished to have kept his mouth shut. The Potions teacher's dark eyes seemed to widen. His lips parted in obvious disbelief.

Harry's expression mirrored the older man's.

'Deflect! Anything!'

"Life at an orphanage isn't exactly a stable environment." It was the truth. Not quite, though. "It's always hard to say goodbye. That day was just particularly difficult."

Snape's expression was unreadable again and Harry hoped that was a good sign.

"I think we both know you're not being honest with me," he spoke quietly and Harry forced himself not to look away. "I will not force you to speak, however."

Harry was sure that Snape knew. This meant that other teachers were probably aware as well. He couldn't leave this question mark unanswered.

"Who else knows?" he whispered rather than spoke.

"The headmaster, Professor McGonagall and myself. Your Head of House is unaware."

That confused Harry.

"Professor Dumbledore will have heard something from my guardian. She won't have told him outright, but it's not exactly a secret.

Professor McGonagall... She was at St Mary's, so I'm not surprised. Why you? Or rather, why not Professor Sprout as well?"

"Four years is a bit more than the official reports say, Mr Potter," Snape countered.

Harry was horrified to think that Snape had read those reports. He forced himself to stay calm and tried to delay the question, "That's what Ron would call 'stalemate,' sir."

"I would offer 'quid pro quo,' but while it is believed that I use students who irk me for potions ingredients, I am by no means a cannibal."

Harry laughed causing Snape to lift his eyebrows.

"I hoped to confuse you. You are a bit young to understand the reference."

"I didn't see the film, but a friend of mine did," Harry grinned. "I didn't expect you to know that particular movie, sir."

"I most certainly don't, Mr Potter. There was a book first. And again, you are just buying time," Snape warned quietly.

"You first."

"What do you want to know?"

"Why did Professor Dumbledore tell you?"

"Because I am far more experienced in dealing with children from broken homes than any other Head of House."

Harry covered his face with his hands. He should have known this wouldn't be easy. Snape was a lot smarter than the majority of people. That included him. He could only lose the game.

"My turn...why have you - and, I assume, your friends - made an entire group of social workers, doctors, psychiatrists and the like believe that you had spent less than a year in the orphanage that you so fittingly call Hell?"

Leave it to Snape to get right to the point.

Harry looked away, he took a deep breath and said, "Would you have subjected yourself to the power of an adult after that, Professor Snape? So, yes, we lied. Like this we'd be placed somewhere, preferably together. Neither of us wanted to be locked in again..." Panic rose within him all of a sudden, "Please, promise me you won't tell!"

"Mr Potter, I've been a teacher at this school for ten years. I am responsible for every child that crosses the threshold. I'm not even allowed to keep this information from the headmaster."

Harry felt a shiver run down his spine at the calmly spoken words. He was up in an instant.

"Mr Potter..."

"I won't be turned in!" his voice shook, but that intensified Harry's resolution rather than broke it.

"That was the last thing on my mind. However, the people who were sent to help," he punctuated the last word, "have been working under false pretences for the past six months. It jeopardizes the efficiency of their treatment."

"What efficiency? None of those who were locked in have come out again!" Harry exclaimed angrily. "You think we didn't hear them? 'Dangerous' and 'damaged' children were to be locked up! Everybody would go barmy in a bloody psych wing! Then the rumour spread that those who were there for less than a year were stable...Thank Goodness, Sullivan messed with the files! They had no way of telling who was there for how long. So, yes, we lied. Who wouldn't?" he started to breathe harshly, trying to regain control. This conversation went way out of hand. Inwardly shaking, he continued quietly, "We are fine. Don't mess with this." His last sentence sounded as threatening as it was pleading.

Snape was remarkably unfazed by the child's outburst. As if contemplating his next words, he was silent for a moment.

"I understand your concern. You got the wrong impression, though," he said calmly. "The people responsible for your care after Mr

Sullivan's deeds had come to light obviously seriously misjudged the situation. I would never force you, or demand of you, to seek out those people for help after failing you so profoundly. I merely suggest that this piece of information should be related to the headmaster, the deputy headmistress or another adult you trust."

"I don't trust you," Harry spat coldly.

Again, the man's annoyingly calm expression remained unchanged. "No, I believe you wouldn't. Professor McGonagall however has done..."

"She's a good person, that doesn't mean I would trust her with this kind of information. I've known her for less than a month," Harry interrupted.

"Your guardian then."

"Sister Augustine? I trust her, sir, but this isn't her concern."

"You are her charge," Snape protested.

"She doesn't ask. We don't tell. That's how it works with the past when you come to a new orphanage. Clean slate, sir, some people need it more than others," the young boy explained, looking like an old man.

"If she complies with this rule, she is a lousy g..." he wouldn't be able to complete his sentence. The torch behind Harry lit up, the boy's fingers itched, but he managed to calm down. Snape's hand slipped into his pocket within a second.

"Don't ever insult the Sister!" Harry practically growled. "She's done more good than you can imagine, you ignorant twit. Do you have any idea what lengths she's going to, to give us a good life? You don't. You say that every kid that walks over the castle's threshold is under your care, but you openly favour some over others. Every child has the opportunity to go to any teacher at this school, they have parents, they bloody well have a nurse! Sister Augustine is alone! Twenty-four hours a day, three-hundred and sixty-five days a year. Unless there's school, but there's always someone who's sick or too young to go to school... She's mother, aunt, nurse, teacher, whatever we need her to be. Show her the respect she deserves!"

"And yet, you don't seem to be demanding any of those roles from her," Snape countered calmly. Harry wondered briefly why he hadn't lost any school points or worse for his outburst.

"She is all I need her to be, too," he stated firmly.

Silence followed.

The Potions Master had come to a decision. "For now, this conversation will be a secret on my part. I will not speak to the headmaster or Professor McGonagall about it. However," he spoke urgently, "in return I want your word that you will come to a teacher if you have the impression that you or friends with whom you have contact struggle more than is usual with what has happened to you. Professor Flitwick has told me that you are familiar with goblin ways, and I am aware how seriously promises are taken in that particular society. I will hold you to it."

The moment Snape had promised not to speak, Harry felt calm. And ashamed of his outburst.

It seemed like a good bargain. He could even choose the teacher.

"I promise to approach a teacher of Hogwarts if the need arises," he stated firmly. He could feel the walls registering his pledge.

Snape wasn't the only being to hold him to the promise he'd given.

"Very well," the Potions Master said. "Since I believe that this conversation was punishment enough, I will let you leave without detention. However, I must take thirty points from Hufflepuff for your behaviour, otherwise the members of my House will grow suspicious."

Harry gulped a little. Thirty points were quite a lot for a First Year to lose. It unexpectedly shamed him to have let down his House mates like that.

He then nodded. He wasn't going to apologize for his outburst, though. Somehow he knew that that the Potions Master didn't expect him to.

All they did was wishing each other a good day.

When the door closed, Snape exhaled with a sigh. Things were worse than he'd hoped. Lily's son had endured a terrible ordeal for longer than he'd assumed.

All the more impressive was how well he'd adjusted. The boy's self-control was excellent, too. Even fools would have felt the air burn. The fact it hadn't spoke for itself.

The question was just how much of the magic Harry Potter had unleashed was accidental, and how much of it was intentional.

The child needed to speak to someone about what happened. Nevertheless, Rome hadn't been built in a day. Neither would be the boy's trust in adults.

The promise would make him question his state of mind more closely.

He would go to someone.

It irked the Potions Master to have done so little. But it was the only thing he'd been able to do without cornering the Hufflepuff too much.

Harry was considerably calmer in the afternoon, but it took a while to get rid off the feeling of absolute dread after his talk.

He couldn't believe his secret was out. Snape had known the official reports and now was in possession of knowledge that no other adult had, with the exception of Sullivan himself and Natruk.

Whoever had said that talking about it was going to make you feel better was a blithering fool. It wasn't even comforting. However, he couldn't deny that he was grateful for Snape's promise not to tell anyone.

That certainty had caused him to settle down within the following hours. He'd spent it on Hogwarts' grounds, avoiding friends and adversaries alike. Interestingly enough, when it was time to eat dinner, he realized that due to his talk with Snape and the anxiety that followed, he'd hardly had time to think about the specific date.

Somehow, he had hoped not to replace the memories of that day with something that scared him almost as much.

Whenever he thought of the date, his thoughts drifted to Char, wondering how he was doing. He would have given almost anything to be with him now. So, he did the next best thing and started writing a letter containing today's events and anything else that came to mind. Hogwarts' busiest owl, Hedwig, was more than happy to deliver the piece of parchment.

Now his friends at Hogwarts deserved an explanation. He hated not being entirely truthful with them, but the alternative was worse. However, they deserved something.

He spoke of orphanages in general and his experiences with them save for the one that had set him off: the constant changes, the loss of friends, the waiting for anyone to care, the lack of space, the bad luck of having caretakers who'd hardened too much over the years, being bullied in school for wearing old clothes... The list went on and on. Harry didn't sugar-coat anything, but he avoided any kind of personal information.

Present as he spoke were Susan, Hannah, Eloise, and his Slytherin friends as well as Hermione, Ron and Neville.

The round-faced, shy boy had impressed Harry by telling his brother that he'd much rather sit with his new friends for now instead of joining him. It was the first time he'd seen Neville stand up to Laci.

Ron had heard from Percy of Harry's more or less impertinent behaviour. While he didn't tell them in detail what it was about this day that unsettled him, he told them that it had to do with what he'd told them in the course of this evening.

They all seemed satisfied with his explanation (which was almost identical to what he'd tried to tell Snape) and didn't pry any further.

"Mr Potter."

Harry gulped. He'd been so engrossed in the conversation with his friends he hadn't noticed Professor McGonagall's arrival.

"Professor?"

"I see you are feeling better," she said casually, but didn't fool Harry for a second.

"Yes, Professor, thank you," he replied just as casually.

"Mr Filch has informed me of your encounter," she continued, waiting for Harry's reaction.

"I am the first person to admit that it was not pleasant," the eleven-year-old decided to state truthfully.

"It has come to my understanding that Professor Snape took care of the matter."

"He did."

"Well then, I expect you to do an essay on the topic we have learned today in addition to your homework. I want all of it on my desk by Friday, Mr Potter," she continued. Next to her strictness, there was a glimmer in her eyes that made Harry smile.

"I won't disappoint you, Professor," he said earnestly.

"For your sake I would hope not," she merely said, but her lips twitched a little. She wished them all a pleasant evening and left.

He hoped she never found out the truth. He didn't want her to treat him any differently from the way she did now.

"Lucky you, mate!" Ron exclaimed, as soon as she was out of earshot. "Snape and Professor McGonagall handling this? It's a miracle you went through this without ending up in detention. Or a potion's ingredient."

Thinking of the Potions Master and his Silence of the Lambs reference made Harry laugh out loud for the first time in many days.

A couple of days later, Eloise, Susan and Hannah decided to spend some time with a group of third-year Hufflepuff girls who'd offered them to come along. It was a Sunday afternoon and Harry's preparations for the following week were finished. Since he had

three hours left before Madame Pomfrey awaited him, he decided to visit the Great Hall, hoping to see some faces he knew.

Hermione waved enthusiastically when she saw him standing in the doorway. Ron was sitting beside her.

"Hello, Harry! Is Blaise coming, too?" Ron asked instantly. Those two had formed a friendship over wizard's chess. Millicent swore that Blaise had never been beaten so devastatingly than that one time a miscalculation had caused him to lose against Ron within ten minutes. She was convinced that it would do her cousin some good for he usually only lost against adults. By now, the boys were meeting at least three times a week to play one, two, or three games of chess.

Harry grinned, "Just because I'm abysmal at chess doesn't make me invisible, you know."

Ron ducked his head a little, "I didn't mean to..."

Harry's smile widened, "You didn't. I haven't seen him, but I've no idea. What are you doing?"

Hermione lifted the book she'd been reading. It had a black cover and with grey letters was written: Rune Magic, a Beginner's Guide.

Seeing the title made him wonder what an advanced book would look like. It was enormous. The topic intrigued him, though. It was the first form of magic he'd witnessed, coming from someone else but him. Goblin magic, it was also called. According to Kertak, only a few wand-carriers dealt with this branch of magic.

"Rune Magic. How come?"

"You," Hermione answered directly. "Well, you and Professor Flitwick. Did you know that there isn't a single spell by wizards and witches to ward off ghosts? There are only rituals. All of them contain runes. Do you happen to know why that is, Harry?"

"That's odd, true, but I have no idea," he answered truthfully. "I'll ask Kertak."

"Oh no, not necessary, Harry. I like finding answers by consulting the books."

"Why now? I mean it's almost been a month since the incident with Binns."

"It now fit into my study plan," the girl answered with a smile.

Hermione Granger was the most intelligent person their age Harry knew. Followed by Theodore Nott as a close second. Unlike her though, he wasn't quite so studious.

"What have you learned so far?"

They were just about to converse when Neville arrived.

"Thank Merlin, Neville!" Ron shouted. "Please, tell me something that has nothing to do with rune magic." What he received was a stern glare from Harry and Hermione.

Neville hadn't heard or seen the exchange between his friends. The shadow of some past fear was evident in his eyes.

"What happened?" Harry asked immediately.

"Yesterday evening... We were running late, Laci, Seamus, Dean and I. It was past curfew. We were on our way to the Gryffindor Tower when the staircase suddenly led to some other place. Then we heard Peeves and we hid in a room nearby..." He shuddered. "There was a giant, an enormous dog with three heads. I think it's the thing Professor Dumbledore warned us about."

Harry leaned back in his seat. Now that was something he had not expected. Hermione looked shocked, Ron excited.

"Blimey, Neville! That's news. And what are you doing now?"

"That's not all," Neville continued. While the encounter seemed to have shaken him, he showed a certain amount of curiosity. "Laci saw that there is a trapdoor right beneath the beast's feet. We are now trying to find out what's beneath the trapdoor."

That was the stupidest idea Harry had heard since Eric's suggestion of replacing the content of Sullivan's shampoo with superglue.

"There is a Cerberus in this castle and your brother thinks, 'Oh sure, let's find a fool-proof way of getting myself killed'? That will go over well," Harry stated sarcastically.

Neville ducked his head a little, but he seemed determined to justify his brother.

"That's not it, Harry," he began, but Seamus and Dean called out his name and he excused himself.

"Aren't you curious?" Ron asked immediately, his tone hushed.

"This entire castle is buzzing with history and mystery and everything in between. If I wanted to get to the bottom of every little secret in this place, I'd be doing nothing else for the rest of my life. The Cerberus of ancient mythology is the guardian of the Underworld. He let everyone in, but nobody ever got out... I'm really not interested in taking the chance. This is a treasure hunt, but I'm not interested in treasure, Ron. Life's more important than that."

"But it might be vital!" Hermione exclaimed.

Harry contemplated her statement then said, "I seriously hope nobody is thick enough to try to hide something and then put a three-headed watchdog that everyone can see in front of it. That person might as well put up a big neon light with the inscription: 'Please, oh noisy ones! It is here! Yes, right here! Enter, make yourself at home.' If a group of eleven-year-old kids are able to access and enter your hiding place, you can count on the fact that you did something wrong."

"I guess that makes sense," Hermione's tone of voice was proof enough that she wasn't entirely convinced.

"So, you are not going to do anything?" Ron asked.

Harry smirked, "I'm not going ask the dog out for a stroll. That doesn't mean I won't ask around."

"Then why did you censure Neville, Laciuss, Dean and Seamus?" Hermione asked reproachfully. "I don't think they'll go near that dog again."

"I don't trust Laciuss enough to believe that," he answered. "I didn't want to scare Neville. I want him to think of his and his brother's safety first because I can't count on Laciuss to do so. Seamus and Dean I hardly know and Neville is my friend." In the terms of an Other, at least. They didn't know each other well enough to be friends in Harry's terms. He liked the timid child, though. He was also quite sure that beneath the insecure surface was a courageous personality. All they had to do was coax that side a little to come forward. And sometimes, kindness didn't bring you far in that aspect. And Neville's initial protest had showed him that there was fire within him. Unlike the boy's brother, he didn't want to put that out.

"Are you going to tell us if you find anything?" Ron asked, curious.

"Of course. Secrecy is vital, though. I doubt the teachers will take it well if a bunch of First Years start asking too many questions about the forbidden corridor," Harry pointed out.

"I will be reading up on three-headed dogs," Hermione said, her enthusiasm had dimmed at the mention of the professors' disapproval, but her curiosity still overweighed.

"You said you'd ask around. Who are you going to ask? I mean the professors won't say anything," Ron brought to Harry's attention.

"Peeves might."

A/N: I felt bad for leaving a cliffhanger like this, so I decided to focus on finishing this chapter before focusing on my other WIPs (Harry Potter and Avatar). So, here it goes. I hope you enjoyed it.

Special thanks to Serpenscript for beta-ing this chapter.

Also, I want to thank all of those who've reviewed. I've almost received 1000 reviews for twenty-three posts... Thank you, that is amazing.

I can't promise you when I'll be updating next, especially since my vacation is over in a couple of days and I want to focus on my other stories for the moment.

Next Chapter: Of Times Past and Present (arrival of Binn's replacement, new faces, two familiar ones and other things)

Chapter 13: Of Times Past and Current

Peeves said something. More than could have been expected of any teacher at Hogwarts. What he said, however, was another matter.

"Yes, the door. The trap trap door. Shouldn't be sayin' anything, should I? Nothing for noisy Firsties. Beneath the beast's feet, you fall down down down, right into devil's grasp...'

Harry couldn't exactly call himself religious. He really wasn't, but he had no intention of finding out what devil he'd face once he passed one of the fiercest beasts in ancient mythology.

His curiosity was peaked nevertheless.

What could possibly be so important that it must be hidden beneath a hell hound's feet and let it be protected by a 'devilish' creature and yet hiding it visible enough even First Years were able to discover it? This wasn't merely 'hidden in plain sight,' this was 'so openly hidden it could not be missed.' Harry's synapses were awakened. He couldn't help but be intrigued, and more than a little suspicious. He didn't have the slightest clue what could have been hidden, but Harry had a fair idea by whom the 'what' had been hidden. The 'why' was another question entirely and Harry didn't like what he found. The warning, the blatancy of the guarded place, the easy access... All this would pique curiosity within the most passive of souls – especially if those souls were still young.

Harry reflected on every moment he'd spent in the presence of Professor Dumbledore and he was unable to remember any falseness or ambiguity in his manner.

Power, yes. In spades. However, while power corrupted, power alone wasn't enough to intentionally endanger people under one's care. But, certainly, nobody could be so ignorant as not to realize that ominous warnings and watchdogs weren't enough to fend off snooping children. Quite the reverse. Perhaps Professor Dumbledore was simply too old to empathize with the mind of an eleven-year-old.

It was possible.

There was that small inner voice of doubt he was unable to ignore, however, and with a heavy heart, he removed the headmaster from the listing of 'slightly strange but harmless adult' and mentally filed him under 'ambiguous yet nonviolent characters.' He would watch his step around Professor Dumbledore in the future. He'd always been somewhat cautious. It was simply his nature. But now... now things were different. Now, an entirely different level of caution was required.

As promised, he'd told Hermione and Ron about his findings. Theo, Millicent and Blaise had been present as well. Theo pretty much agreed with him about the need to be cautious. Blaise and Ron were all for the adventure of finding out what was below the mysterious trapdoor. Hermione and Millicent too were willing to do some research, but they were hesitant about actually doing something. While it would have been a blatant lie to say that Theo and Harry weren't interested, they thought the circumstances were suspect. In the end, they agreed to keep their eyes and ears open, as well as doing some research to a certain extent, such as reading up on hellhounds and other beasts.

Preferably without attracting any teacher's attention.

By telling Neville about his findings, he warned the other 'first-year research group' not to dig too deep. When he saw Laciuss sitting in the library reading 'Fantastic Beasts & Where To Find Them – Mastery Level' by Newt Scamander, Harry sighed. He should have known Laciuss wouldn't let this go, if only because the warning had been delivered by a kid he viewed as a rival.

Somehow, those short encounters had been enough for Laciuss to view Harry as competition. The Hufflepuff First Year assumed that Laciuss' antagonism and the wish to prove himself better than Harry was because he was one of the few daring to speak up against the Boy Who Lived when his actions were questionable. Harry had noticed that Laciuss Longbottom was off-limits to all those who'd known his name since early childhood... and those from non-magical families caught on fairly quickly. There were older Slytherins – those that didn't dance to Malfoy's tune – who weren't too fond of him. All in all, he was very popular, though. It seemed as if respect for the Boy Who Lived was somehow implanted into children born into Wizarding society...

Even fear.

Harry noticed that Theodore avoided confrontation with the Gryffindor at all cost. However, whenever the eleven-year-old Hufflepuff tried to mention it around his friend, Theo changed the subject.

Susan held her own against Laciús, but she wasn't openly hostile towards him (neither was Harry, but his conversations with Laciús, if happening at all, were cut short and tense). It was obvious his attitude annoyed her sometimes, but she wasn't the kind of person to resent someone who'd never harmed her in any way. She was always ready to jump in for Harry's defence, however... not that it was necessary.

Laciús kept his contempt in check, but whenever they were in class together, namely Potions and Herbology, he was determined to prove his excellence. His knowledge reached far beyond Harry's, except when it came to topics of which Harry had learned every detail, nuance and shade of possible meaning in his countless talks with Kertak. To Laciús' disappointment, Harry was a better brewer than he was.

Potions, while working with liquids, had a lot to do with fire. It gave Harry an edge in instinctively knowing when things weren't right.

That didn't mean he was unquestionably better than anyone else in class. Hermione was much more skilled and knowledgeable than either Laciús or him. Also, Harry struggled with potions that were brewed on a 'lowerflame'... When the water wasn't at cooking temperature, he always messed up. It annoyed him and he was trying to work around the problem, but so far, he couldn't do anything else but strictly follow the recipe. Not that it worked every time. When he managed to screw up yet another task, a potion that helped cooling sunburned skin, one of the simplest Low Flame Potions there are, Snape had looked at him as if he'd switched bodies with someone else.

The Potions professor was another matter entirely. The first week after their conversation in Snape's office, Harry had avoided the teacher at all cost. He'd left class as soon as the bell rang and entered late enough to be on time without having to spend a second more with the adult wizard than was absolutely necessary.

To his great surprise, Snape proved himself to be one of the few adults who was actually capable of letting things go. Well, maybe not "let go" in the strictest sense. Snape had not forgotten what had been said behind closed doors, but he was being quiet about it and Harry was grateful for small mercies. He still avoided the Potions professor, but some of the tension was gone.

His sixth week at Hogwarts was almost over, and Harry could finally say that he was fully settled in. Aside from the actual classes, Harry was visiting Madame Pomfrey every Sunday where he helped doing the inventory and was allowed to take care of the occasional patient (observed by a pair of very strict eyes). Though his treatment of Neville had shown her that he was good at calming distressed children, she was yet careful at leaving him alone with her patients.

The young Hufflepuff couldn't exactly blame her for that. As much as he knew it was her job to take care of injured kids, he wouldn't leave her alone with one of his charges either.

His absence was felt at St Mary's Orphanage, but if there was one thing its inhabitants were used to, it was change. Lack of stability might cause a lot of pain, but if it was a constant, you learned to adapt fairly quickly. Tommy was the last to adjust, but the entire house made sure he wasn't hurting too much. He finally regained his joyful spirits and by sticking close to Johnny, he had won 'another big brother.' Still, Harry worried about the next time he returned home. He would have to be ready for dealing with anger and disappointment.

As much as dwelling on the past did no good, worrying about the future, events there was nothing he could do to prevent, wasn't much better. Harry decided to focus on the present.

Charms.

Due to the additional Charms lessons, they'd been able to practise Wingardium Leviosa earlier than usual. Today was the first day, to be precise. Harry gaped at Flitwick when he taught them the necessary wand movements: swish and flick.

That explained why his quill had been so inclined to move when they were practising random wand movements a few weeks ago!

For once, he was the first and only who managed to let the feather hover at first try. He did decide to use the incantation, though.

"Excellently done, Mr Potter!" the half-goblin exclaimed. "But your grip isn't entirely correct, I must say. Try to let nothing but the fingertips touch the wand."

It was a correction Harry had heard many times. The Hovering Charm was cast by gripping the wand neutrally, but Harry's hands still started to cramp whenever he forced himself to hold the wand properly for neutral charms.

When he talked to the Charms teacher about it, Flitwick tried to calm him down, "Most First Years struggle with this at first. It may have to do with a huma... child's anatomy. I'm not quite sure. It'll come to you. However, if your hands hurt, I want you to hold the wand in a way that's comfortable. Nothing has more dreadful consequences than speaking certain incantations when you are in pain. If your grip isn't entirely correct, some spells might not work as strongly as they should, but at least we will have no wands running havoc."

For a moment, Harry was silent as he made sure his classmates were all busy practising, then he murmured in Gobbledegook, "The blessing of long fingers... They do come in handy, don't they?" He smiled in amusement.

The teacher's lips twitched, but he remained stoic as he reprimanded his student, "Please try to refrain from speaking Gobbledegook in class, Mr Potter."

A beat of silence before he quietly continued, "The irony of a wand-carrier's anatomy compared to a goblin's has never been lost to me."

Then, he spoke aloud, "That's it for today, children. Since History lessons will resume tomorrow we won't be seeing each other until next Tuesday. Please, read up on Hovering Charms and write a short essay on troubles you're having with the spell." Then he beamed at the class, "It was an enormous pleasure to have worked with you so intensely these past few weeks and I will miss the additional lessons. Enjoy your weekend!"

Professor Dumbledore had found and hired a replacement for Binns, but nobody really knew who that person was. Usually (according to Cedric) new teachers were introduced in the beginning of a new year, but this time it wasn't possible to adhere to traditions and protocols. The replacement would be starting lessons tomorrow and the Halloween feast was meant to be the official day of introduction.

Harry didn't care much about how the new teacher was going to be welcomed by the castle. He just hoped it wasn't another Binns.

Potions the next day was over quickly and the Hufflepuffs were about to be the first class ever to welcome a new History professor in three-hundred years. It seemed fitting that the class who'd caused the sacking of Binns would be allowed to do that.

Harry was about to open the door when a presence within the classroom caused him to falter in his steps. He missed the handle and walked headlong into the door.

Used to Harry's usual, almost feline coordination, his classmates stared, flabbergasted at the uncharacteristically clumsy move.

"You okay, Harry?" Eloise asked worriedly, but at the same time she had troubles suppressing the giggle that threatened to escape. That urge died quickly when she saw Harry take a step back, looking shocked.

"Harry?" Susan caught on quickly.

For once, Harry didn't react at all. He quickly stepped forward and tore open the door. There were five people inside, but only two of them were important, one in particular.

"Kertak!" the young Hufflepuff exclaimed as he rushed forward.

It was strange, really. When Harry had first been brought to St Mary's, he hadn't seen Kertak very often, sometimes there had been several weeks in between meetings, but after six weeks without seeing either of his family, the face of his oldest friend was enough to make Harry jump with joy.

"Karruk," he shortened the greeting and embraced the goblin, all formality forgotten.

"Rukan," his trusted friend said back, obviously not caring much for manners either.

"Crasnac..." Harry started, only to continue in English, "What? Why are you...?"

"Look around and see," Kertak ordered him, but his voice betrayed a kind smile.

"Nilràu Natruk," Harry smiled, taking a step back. Having noticed the goblin's presence the second he'd entered the room stripped his voice of any surprise. "Kanrukai, sir."

His eyes flickered to the third goblin in the room. Harry didn't know him.

He was a bit shorter than Kertak and the lines in his face told Harry that he was already past eighty years of life. His amber eyes told the young Hufflepuff that he had spent several years of his life in the north... Kertak had once explained to him the adjustment of eye-colour depending on the area. Harry couldn't remember much for it was too complicated, but for some reason that piece of information had stuck. The yet nameless goblin was inspecting him critically; obviously not happy about the casual way he was talking to Natruk.

"Santrakai, parohîn," Harry greeted the unknown goblin formally who decided to respond with a polite, detached bow.

"Please, take your seats," Professor Dumbledore, who'd watched the interaction silently, told his students. All obeyed, though Harry glanced at Kertak asking wordlessly whether there was time for them to talk later, which was confirmed by a silent nod.

Only when the children were all seated did Harry truly take notice of the middle-aged witch standing next to the headmaster. She was about a foot shorter than the tall wizard, had long, rather dark hair, and was wearing a deep-blue cloak.

Dumbledore started to speak, smiling kindly.

"This school has been part of my life for a very long time. Ever since I was elected as headmaster, there were many decisions to be

made and several posts to be filled, some of which were giving me more troubles than others. Professor Binns has been part of this castle since before my grandfather first stepped across the threshold and to find a replacement was an unexpected and demanding task. There aren't a lot of historians in Great Britain fit for this position. Bathilda Bagshot has long since passed the age of teaching children..."

Well, Harry thought, that and the fact she seemed to be a highly narrow-minded person, judging by her book.

"Also, I thought it was time for some fresh blood inside historians' ranks... Only there, mind you. I've no intention of sacking myself," the headmaster's eyes twinkled humorously. "For once, we may actually talk of mixed blood, but NilràuNatruk, representative of goblin authority in London will now speak to you."

Harry's head turned so quickly to inspect the older goblin, he hurt his neck. Kertak had never told him what a nilràu's was, but for Natruk to be a spokesperson for the goblin society of London? His trusted friend would have a lot to explain.

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore," Natruk said softly. He smiled at Harry before he grew serious. "'We are not here to judge, we are not here to scold. We are here to make sure the mistakes of the past are not repeated.' Wise words, spoken by Fitzwilliam Fidesberk, Minister of Magic during the last two years of the Dark Rebellion that ended in 1745. It isn't my task to tell you what happened during the rebellion or its significance. What you should know however is that this particular wizard said those words looking into the faces of Great Britain's highest-ranked goblins of their time, amongst others the leader of a feared group that was called SacùrYAnà. He'd ordered the Aurors and everyone else to stay outside, and walked headlong into Gringotts, fully aware he might never leave again. This almost unequalled courage has become part of goblin's tales as if he was one of the Great Warrior's of Old. One of us, if you will. When Professor Dumbledore approached us, there was a great uproar amongst our...ministers, I guess, is the word... I was told that there were words of bitterness towards the failings of this particular school. However the chief of the Scottish Islands rose and repeated Fidesberk kandrìl's words reminding them and thereby us all of the failings on our side. If what is going to be said in this class wars with what you have been taught, I beg you to stand up and speak. Only

then, there is a chance of reconciliation. As to make sure that the role of the goblins in the rebellions is not down-played, Professor Dumbledore employed a second teacher for this class. My place is yours, salà."

For the first time in their acquaintance, Harry realized that Natruk translated the formal phrases of the goblins into English.

The witch seemed to understand nevertheless for she stepped forward. Her smile was honest and displayed enthusiasm Harry hadn't witnessed in any other teacher but Flitwick.

"Good morning, children. My name is Crystal Clearwater and, yes, I am fully aware what that sounds like." Harry who'd managed to contain his smile at the name, grinned wildly as she acknowledged the joke. "My mother was a very witty woman and I married a rather hilarious man." He was relieved to see that this woman possessed a sense of humour. "By what Professor Dumbledore told me, new teachers aren't asked to tell their students how they'd come to stand in front of them. Therefore, I won't bore you with that kind of information. Main focus of my personal studies has been national history of the Wizarding Community with a tad bit of international history. I'm looking forward to my time at Hogwarts, in particular working side by side my colleague, Professor Taylok." At that, she turned to the goblin Harry hadn't known before.

"Professor Taylok" didn't speak, he bowed formally 'my place is yours' to Natruk, thereby giving the other goblin the honour of introduction... or something like that.

Harry had paid attention to Kertak and Natruk, knew how to speak politely with a goblin he didn't know, but the 'art to properly bow' was something even Kertak was still forced to learn for his graduation.

Natruk stepped forward and addressed them once more.

"May I introduce to you sgrafur, Skilà Taylok by name. He is one of England's finest goblin historians and has volunteered to teach you something about our history as we've taught our children for generations. You won't be supervised by two teachers at once, but there will be close dialogue between them outside of actual class. We have hopes to bring this dialogue into the class of your fellow students who have passed the age of fourteen... not into yours,

however." Harry's eyebrows rose at the unspoken 'you are too young' which was noted by Kertak (whose eyes lit up) and Natruk (who smiled a little). "For now however – since starting a new topic would be nonsense – we're happy to let you leave and enjoy your weekend. Farewell, children. I hope we meet again."

Surprised, the Hufflepuff first-years exchanged questioning looks. Only when Harry stood up without the inkling of a doubt in Natruk's sincerity, and Dumbledore confirmed that they could leave, the rest followed.

"See you later, Harry," Susan said as soon as she'd wished the teachers a nice weekend.

"See you," Harry replied, lifting his right hand in a parting gesture.

"You're not coming for lunch?" Ernie asked.

"Later, Ernie."

Ernie opened his mouth to speak, but was silenced by the headmaster who addressed the new teachers, "Professor Clearwater, Professor Taylok, please join me for lunch. Nilràu Natruk, Kertak. It was a pleasure. You may come to my office in... let's say at 2 o'clock."

"That would be perfect. Thank you, Headmaster Dumbledore," Natruk replied politely.

It took a moment before the classroom was empty, but that didn't keep the goblins and their young human friend from starting their conversation.

"You didn't travel all this way just to visit me, right?" Harry half-joked, incapable of keeping his surprise from his tone.

"No, of course not," Kertak answered seriously. "Seeing you here is just a necessary evil while I was looking forward to exploring Hogwarts."

Harry grinned. Then, he looked at Natruk, "Is there something you've decided not to tell me, sir?"

"Goblin society consists of five ranks: common goblins, nilràu, kasrîm, rukàl and the twelve Grand Ones, our ministers," the adult goblin explained, obviously ready to ignore his society's rules for Harry's sake. "As you can see, I don't belong to common kin, but belong to the fourth caste."

"And, unless the one I assumed as Vanric Kandril isn't at least a nilràu himself, you are Vanric Kandril," Harry stated casually. He knew that goblins weren't allowed to tell much of their society (Kertak was regularly walking a fine line), so he wasn't hurt. That didn't mean he was too happy about it either.

"nal ke tenî armac sel," Natruk sighed, lamenting Harry's perception.

"I'm sorry," Harry replied half-serious, half-amused.

"Don't be. I believe my fellow goblins to be a bit foolish in their insistence of keeping so much to themselves, but since you are by no means related to our kin, my hands are tied." He sincerely regretted keeping things from Harry, which was enough for the young boy.

"It's alright. Everyone has their secrets," he smiled faintly. Then he grew serious, "How's it going? I mean, do you have any leads on the break-in?"

"No," Natruk answered grimly. "Whoever did it was very thorough in their concealment."

"Was it a single wizard... or witch?"

"Yes, and that is what worries me. What was done requires a lot of power. There aren't many wizards – it was doubtlessly a wizard – capable of breaking into Gringotts undetected." Natruk sighed. "Well, it's done. We can't do much more than what we've been doing so far..."

"I wish I could help..." Harry began, but he didn't finish his sentence. There was really nothing he could do. His intentions made Natruk smile softly.

"Thank you, Harry. That's very kind of you... Why don't you and Kertak talk about what you can do? You could explore the castle doing so."

And they did just that. Agreeing with Natruk to meet in the History classroom in an hour, Harry and Kertak walked down corridors and hidden passages while they chatted, talked and discussed all those things you couldn't put down on paper.

Among other things, Harry could finally talk to his best friend about the Influence.

"... I didn't have time to look it up, but as far as I was told, it's a rare ability," he finished.

Kertak nodded thoughtfully, "Were I human, this would be the perfect opportunity to say 'I told you so.'" For a moment he was quiet before he continued, "I told you so."

"You're a goblin," Harry grinned.

"Oh, we say the same thing," the older goblin laughed. The Hufflepuff joined in.

"Your core always seemed a bit active," his brother said thoughtfully. "But I didn't know this had anything to do with a rare ability. I thought it was normal for juvenile wand-carriers since they always find a way of endangering themselves... I would have told you otherwise."

"I know... Do you know anything about it?"

"Not more than your friends seem to. A goblin's magic, while not as intensely as an elf's magic, is accessing the elements more intimately than a human's when it comes to moving them. However, we cannot create the elements."

"Me neither."

"No, but you told your classmates a blatant lie by claiming you only possessed the PassiveInfluence."

"Only fools admit they're freaks around near-strangers. Disregarding how well you like them."

Kertak stopped abruptly and looked at his younger friend severely, "Do not ever put down your talents in such a way ever again. It is a gift. Embrace it! However, I agree. Take your time before you tell. Raùn should be chosen carefully, but once you have them, they are for life."

Harry nodded seriously. Saràn meant 'friend' in Gobbledegook. However, over the years the orphan had learned that the term was formal and not at all did it possess the same meaning Harry attributed to it. It meant 'potential friend' at the most, 'well-liked acquaintance'. Raùn meant what Harry was used to call as 'friends are family'. Closest blood kin, especially siblings, as well as your closest friends were called raùn. They'd known each other for three years before Kertak had introduced him to this term. They still called each other saràn, though, because that word had laid the foundation of their friendship.

As Harry continued his guiding tour around Hogwarts, after making sure nobody was around, he also mentioned Quirrell. The Defence teacher had been keeping a low profile, at least as far as Harry could tell. Apart from his speech patterns, there was nothing out of the ordinary. Still, the eleven-year-old distrusted him, even though his precautionary methods of never looking at his teacher directly had prevented any further flashbacks or stabbing pain. As he told Kertak everything he hadn't been able to voice in his letter, the goblin was highly alarmed.

"That sounds bad, Harry. I know you. Your awareness of people's intentions is very high and you're right, by far, more often than most. Should I talk to NilràùNatruk?"

"And say what? I don't have proof, just a hunch; and even though I'm sure he'll believe me, his hands would be tied."

"Sgrafur Taylok might receive the order to keep an eye on the potential threat."

It wasn't a suggestion.

Kertak's tone of voice resembled the seriousness and resolution he'd worn a little more than a year ago when he'd found out about Sullivan's abusive nature... Harry would never forget the way Kertak

had looked at him. Back then, the man had completely lost it, had attacked the little boy until he was black and blue. Not only his torso, which Harry had always been able to hide, but the face as well. It had taken all of his skills in persuasion to prevent Kertak from marching right past the white walls of Hell. If that had happened, the young Hufflepuff wasn't sure what Kertak would've done. As it was, Kertak and Natruk had only known that Harry was at a bad place with a rude, short-tempered man (and that knowledge had nearly caused an explosion hadn't Harry interfered).

Until January 1991.

But that was another story.

Fact was that Harry appreciated Kertak's offer for help this time around. It wouldn't hurt anyone. It wasn't the same. Sullivan had threatened outright that if he told anyone, his friends would suffer. He didn't have to fear such a reaction from Quirrell. The Defence teacher would never know there was someone watching him in the first place; and if he decided to attack, it was good to know there was someone to watch the students' backs.

So, all Harry could say was, "dàio."

Natruk smiled when he saw the unlikely pair laughing and frequently switching between their respective native languages. He wondered if those two even realized it.

He remembered his initial hesitation when his steward's son had told him of the human orphan whom he'd like to introduce to their world (as far as their laws allowed him). However, the boy's unbroken, kindred spirit had quickly dispersed all worries.

As they decided to eat some lunch within the Great Hall, they were followed by curious eyes. Natruk only hoped that Harry's familiarity and easiness around as pair of goblins wouldn't cause any repercussions for him.

For once however, the observant boy didn't seem to notice the whispers. He was entirely focused on Kertak's narrations on St Mary's Orphanage, practically looking like a starving man who was offered some bread.

It was never easy for the young ones to leave their homes, but for Harry it had to be worse... His responsibilities might as well make him a parent, while at the same time he'd suddenly become an only child.

Natruk followed the children without saying more than a few sentences. As much as Harry liked and respected him, Natruk would disturb the boy's happiness more than support it, if he decided to chime in on their conversation.

It wasn't just the younger of the two. Kertak was just as happy to see his littlebrother.

Natruk knew Kertak since he was a baby. Should anything happen to the boy's father – kranòs-nèmcorhalítbrîeken – it would be the nilràu's duty to care for the young goblin until he was of age. Just as Kertak's father had spent his last five years of education under the care of Natruk's parents after losing his own.

Even though his parents were still alive, Kertak had been living in Natruk's home for the past five years and would continue to do so until he was a fully accepted member of society.

The reason why Kertak was technically an orphan (though never forgotten) was that his mother's extraordinary skills had been required at Gringott's sister in the United States.

Ten years.

It was a long time, even for goblins, especially when there was a son who hadn't finished his education. For it wasn't allowed for the young ones to complete their schooling elsewhere but the place they'd started it, Kertak had been forced to stay in London. On the other hand, his father had followed his wife as it was custom.

As much as the child loved his parents, he hardly ever talked about them. Goblin society put a lot of stock in names and families - and so, Kertak's silence on the subject had been rather conspicuous, and a cause for scrutiny, even shame. Then he'd met Harry. The orphan avoided speaking of parents and adults in general, so he never chided the young goblin for the same evasion on his part. It had made Kertak feel less like a recluse and Harry on the other

hand had instantly taken a liking to this strange being who knew things about a world he'd just discovered.

Natrak wondered whether Harry knew anything about that. The boy had once told him that questions concerning someone's parents were rude and private.

Of course, he'd only been six or seven years old at the time.

Hogwarts seemed to have taught him lessons beyond the mere art of wand-magic.

And yet it was still the same boy he'd been since the day Kertak had introduced him.

"... No. But they really enjoyed listening to the Order of Chaos. Anyway, you have to tell me the third passage again. My translation is a mess, I'm telling you, but I just couldn't remember the exact words..."

Yes. Definitely the boy he'd known for so many years.

A/N: What can I possibly say? I am genuinely sorry. I never intended to be on hiatus for so long, but let's just say that real life got in the way and by the time my chapter was ready, I was in need of a beta.

This chapter has only been partially beta-ed, as you'll have doubtlessly noticed.

At this point, I have a request to make: I'm looking for a Beta, preferably someone who's also ready to beta my other Harry Potter story (Finding Parental Care). I'm pretty sure that person would have to be very patient and might need to tell me things several times if you are willing, or know someone who might be interested, I'd be extremely grateful for a PM.

A/N : THANK YOU! At this point, I want to thank all those who've reviewed these past few months. I'm sorry for not replying to some of them, but thanks for the encouragement, the corrections, the occasional ideas. They all inspired me to sit down and write again, which isn't as easy as it sounds, once you've taken a break. So, just... THANK YOU!

A/N Then, last but not least, I feel like apologizing for this chapter. It was planned all along (so I didn't want to just drop it), but it feels like a filler now, especially since I haven't written in such a long time and for those who aren't interested in the whole "goblin society" theme, you might have been a bit disappointed. Anyway, please look at this chapter as my try to go back to writing after an unplanned hiatus.

Below is a short preview to what I've planned for the next chapter.

Preview Next Chapter: "Night of the Dead, Dead of Night"

Halloween, Skeeters and other troubles

The Boy Who Lived starts to view his Defence teacher as a potential threat. Quirrell realizes that he has to take actions sooner rather than later. Harry once again displays his talent at finding himself in situations he'd rather avoid to begin with.

Chapter 14, Part One: Night of the Dead, Dead of Night

He closed the book and sighed. Well, he had the choice between becoming either a musician or acquiring the strength of Heracles if he wanted to get past that beast.

'Singer it is...'

He didn't intend to go past it just yet, but if it was necessary he'd know how. Lucius had told him that the headmaster couldn't be trusted, but to hide something so poorly? He hadn't known the wizard was incompetent as well.

Dumbledore hadn't even been able to conceal what was hidden. Oh, he hadn't known immediately. It had taken a coincidental hint, time and connections. Thank Merlin for Lucius! The goblins hadn't talked, of course, but the Ministry kept a lot of records and Draco's father had access to a majority of them. However, all connections would have been useless hadn't it been for the big mouth of the oaf, Harriet, Haggard, whatever the large man's name was. He'd talked to Professor McGonagall a couple of weeks back, thinking they were alone, about how disastrous it would have been hadn't Dumbledore ('Great man, Dumbledore. Great man!')... The gamekeeper was about as gullible as he looked!) ordered him to remove 'the small package' from the vault a day before the break-in. It hadn't taken a genius to find out that whatever was here now had almost been stolen at Gringotts. It had been more difficult to find out what vault the gamekeeper had accessed.

However, Lucius could be counted on. Of course, he found out. He'd even encountered Hagrid – exactly, that was his name! – at the bank that particular day.

As good as the Malfoys' connections were, Gringotts was goblin business and that was not to be meddled with.

'If you have to decide between a dragon's fury and a goblin's pride, head for the dragon. You are more likely to survive.'

Draco hadn't delivered him this saying for nothing and judging by Taylok's cool demeanour, it was an accurate assumption. Anyway, as so often, the name 'Lucius Longbottom' opened doors that otherwise would have remained firmly locked.

Dumbledore's giant servant had accessed a vault owned by Nicholas Flamel.

It was a small, most likely valuable package, someone that wanted it so dearly as to provoke the goblin's anger and Nicholas Flamel? Flamel had made many discoveries, but the only thing that made sense in this situation was the Philosopher's Stone. Laciuss hadn't told this to anyone but Draco. Seamus and Dean deserved to know for they'd been helping so much these past few weeks... His brother, though? Nev would deliver this to Potter immediately. Oh, his clumsy brother would never do so just for gossip, he was as loyal as a Crup, but the short kid just had a way of making people talk.

It was unnerving, really.

Potter had made several friends within his first week at Hogwarts and yet he didn't seem to truly care about them.

As if gathering followers...

Oh, the goblins' arrival had showed a different Harry Potter. That younger goblin...One of those who'd remained for that one day only... He was obviously liked by the orphan. More than just smiles and kind words, true affection had been displayed.

Goblins.

Even Gran was cautious around them. And she always reprimanded Dad for his mistrust of Dumbledore, for Merlin's sake!

What was Potter's purpose?

Laciuss was unable to make sense of it. Somehow raised by goblins, yet growing up in a Muggle orphanage? Why come to Hogwarts? Everybody knew the goblins did not like to deal with the Wizarding World outside of financial business. There were rumours about Flitwick's family whose father had been disowned for marrying a human woman. Apparently, the conflict had turned out rather badly.

And yet, Potter didn't seem to be hostile when it came to Flitwick. In comparison to how he behaved around Snape, one could almost

assume he liked him despite their stiff mannerisms around each other.

Maybe, he was just here to learn, but somehow that didn't seem right either. A normal eleven-year-old wouldn't alarm him as much.

Or, he had to admit with a sigh, he was just fed up with Potter's 'holier than thou' attitude. He behaved sometimes as if he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. Laciuss scoffed at the thought. What did Potter know about responsibility? He hadn't saved the world from a lunatic, a powerful lunatic who'd nearly succeeded in his attempts. No, that had been his deed, the deed of Laciuss Longbottom... He'd saved the Wizarding World from a terrible fate, and he was expected to do it again, should it happen once more. His mother would rather die than let him, of course, but they'd told him long ago that Wizarding Society would expect, no, demand of him to take such a risk.

'Do not ever let yourself be used by anybody!' his father had told him more than once. 'I let it happen and I almost lost everything!'

On the other hand, he felt responsible for the fate of the world. He'd saved it once. There was no reasonable argument not to try it again. He was part of the world as well as his family, so he was saving them all by protecting it.

Potter wouldn't understand such concepts.

He wasn't stupid. Oh, did he wish Potter was stupid and inept! Unfortunately, he wasn't either. Laciuss didn't know much outside of the classes they had together, namely Potions and Herbology, so he didn't know much about Potter's talents with a wand, but he knew that he had skills and some knowledge in both subjects. By what he'd heard from others, he was rather talented in Charms and Transfiguration. Also, he'd scared the living daylights out of Flint.

This discovery had been made rather coincidentally and only thanks to Draco's keen observation skills. He'd seen the captain of Slytherin's Quidditch team flinch around Potter and told his best friend about it. Together, they'd questioned Flint who'd complied, though not gladly. Since Lucius was one of his father's most important clients, Flint had little choice but talk...

Wandless magic wasn't a common talent for it required a lot of practice, power and skill. All the more worrying it was to see such ability in a peer... Merlin, he wanted his brother out of the young wizard's reach! This would end badly.

Abruptly, he turned back to the bookshelf he'd abandoned in order to leave for tonight's feast. His intention was to find out more about the three-headed watchdog because he wanted to...

He halted mid-step when he saw Quirrell taking the particular book Laciuss had wanted to look at once more, off the shelf. A quiet gasp escaped him and he was too late to stop it. The Defence teacher flinched heavily and he looked up from the book to stare at Laciuss. For one short moment, the Boy Who Lived was sure to have seen a murderous expression on the stuttering professor's face. It was gone a moment later and left behind a wizard who was barely able to keep up a conversation.

"Mr... Mr Mr Long-Longbottom, may-may-may I ask why you are-are not in the Great Hall?"

'I could ask you exactly the same thing...' Laciuss thought, suspicion rising within him.

"I was just on my way, Professor," he lied smoothly. "I simply wanted to check something concerning my..." he let his gaze brush swiftly over the bookshelves within reach, "Transfiguration homework."

"Then I think you shou-shou-should go now." Not quite a threat. It was one, Laciuss was sure, but it didn't truly sound like it. Not leaving Quirrell out of his sight, he said goodbye and backed out of the library. Outside, he nearly collided with his brother.

"Nev! What are you doing here?" he asked irritably. As Neville hastily explained how he'd taken the wrong corridor, he sighed loudly. Only his brother managed to miss the Great Hall after living in this castle for two months!

"Come!" he said sharply, wishing to get away as far as possible from Quirrell. After telling his brother what he'd just seen, he was surprised by his twin brother's reaction: Nev didn't seem to think he was crazy. He frowned a little, yes, but not out of disbelief... He was surprised that this was news to Laciuss.

"Harry said we should be careful around him."

"Really? Harry," he was unable to banish all contempt out of his voice, "warned you?"

"Yes," Neville answered, shrinking a little as he saw his brother's anger. Obviously trying to keep his brother from dwelling on the matter too much, he changed the subject.

"Have you lit the candle, already?"

At that, Laciús almost laughed on an entirely grim matter. It was just that "lighting the candle" indirectly concerned Potter. After all, it was the first year that they knew the names and faces of the two people they lit their candles for.

Lily and James Potter.

Ever since Laciús was able to remember, his parents lit a candle for them on the night of Halloween. They'd never revealed the names, and Laciús suspected it as because their deaths were just too painful for them to think about... They'd given up their lives so Neville and Laciús as well as their son could live.

Anyway, every year, his parents lit a candle in the memory of their friends.

This year, it wouldn't be any different.

"Not yet, but I'm sure there will be some unlit candles around," he answered as they were walking towards the Great Hall. Every once in a while, he shot a look back to make sure Quirrell wasn't following them. As always, his brother picked up on his alertness and instantly started fidgeting. He opened his mouth to ask if the Defence teacher was after them, but Laciús shook his head before Nev was able to voice his concerns. Slowly, his twin brother relaxed and continued walking in silence.

"Over there!" Neville exclaimed as he saw eight large candleholders in an extension of a corridor, only four of which carrying lit candles.

They approached them and Laciuss grabbed a candle with both hands bringing its flame towards an unlit candle's wick. They'd never spoken in all those years on Halloween and they weren't going to start now. Wordlessly, he handed over the candle and gave it to Neville who seized it with a single hand promptly letting it fall.

"Nev, you clumsy..." Laciuss hissed, but his words died on his lips as he saw the candle fall on Neville's cloak. Quickly, as his father had taught him with a wooden stick when he was a little boy, he drew his wand and spoke, "Dissipas!"

To his relief, it worked just enough for the candle to miss Neville by an inch. He heard Nev whimper and spun around, but his cloak was untouched by the fire. Laciuss turned around to look at the candle and was again taken aback by the fact its flame had died.

"Neville, you okay?" a familiar voice spoke only a few feet away. Quickly, Laciuss turned to look at Potter.

"Yes, it's okay," he answered for his brother, but Potter didn't even bother to look at him, continuously watching Neville until said boy nodded and confirmed that he was indeed alright.

"The candles are all out," the clumsy eleven-year-old commented and the Boy Who Lived disbelievingly looked at the candles whose flames were gone. It would have made sense, had only the fallen candle lost its spark, but this?

Laciuss looked at Potter who casually shrugged his shoulders.

"Must have been a breeze," he suggested. It made sense for the castle wasn't exactly protected against the wind. Especially when the first snow had fallen a few days ago, the old building had cooled down considerably. However, he hadn't felt anything like it.

"We need to light another candle," Nev said decidedly. Laciuss remembered how his brother had always serenely held onto this family tradition. It didn't surprise him therefore to hear his timid brother speak with so much vehemence. Potter was taken aback and as he glanced at Laciuss as if to check what he thought about Nev's reaction, Laciuss wanted to curse the arrogant little brat.

"Is that tradition?" Potter asked Neville, apparently genuinely curious. "To light a candle at Halloween? Non-magical humans do have their traditions and goblins celebrate their Night of the Dead on October 21."

"I guess, but it's really a family ritual," Nev explained, before he hesitantly continued. "You know the night ten years ago... Oh!" Laciuss rolled his eyes. Sometimes his brother was so slow. He hadn't even realized that this Halloween was even more special than usual. As always, Neville sensed the Boy Who Lived's reaction and hunched his shoulders before continuing, "Well, by lighting a candle we honour... your parents, actually. Mum, Gran and Dad always spoke of them so highly for being who they were and for doing what they did that night... They always avoided saying their names, though. After my mother saw you at King's Cross, they told us by letter, however."

For the first time, the ever-eloquent little brat was speechless. Their eyes met and Potter was at loss what to say. All he did in the end was somehow folding his hands and performing a bow, before he turned to Neville again, "Thank you. That is... Please, tell your parents and grandmother that their thoughtful gesture is very much appreciated."

Laciuss, who'd learned by observing his father, and Lucius especially, that this polite little speech wasn't anything more than emotionless texture, couldn't help but speak in annoyance, "Sprenger and Institoris! Some emotion wouldn't kill you, Potter."

Blazing emerald caught his gaze and Laciuss' hand slipped into his pocket to grab his wand.

Potter's next words were tense and cold, "Then, please tell me what reaction would seem adequate in your opinion?"

"How about some grief for the people who have brought you into this world and who have died for you?" he shot back.

The short boy looked away, just for a short moment, but when Laciuss thought that he regretted his coldly spoken words, Potter said calmly, "Thank you for telling me how to deal with such a tragic event. What would I do without you?" he added sarcastically.

"Normally, I would cry and scream, but since they've been dead for a long time..."

"Don't be so bloody callous!" Lacius shouted. "They're your parents, you ignorant, ungrateful little brat! You should honour and love them, not ..."

Somewhere, there was a loud crack from what seemed within the castle wall, but as Lacius turned to face it, he saw nothing. Potter however seemed on the verge of pushing him against said wall.

"And you should honour and love your bloody brother, Lacius Longbottom!" the little boy hissed heatedly. "But every time I see the two of you, you push him around, demean him, and you don't even let him think on his own! Don't you dare tell me how to view or love or remember my parents and start questioning your own actions, you..." Whatever he'd meant to say, would never be heard aloud. He froze and whirled around.

"Is-Is there a prob-pro-problem, b-b-boys?" Quirrell approached them.

"No, sir," they all spoke simultaneously.

"It s-sou-sou-sounded as if you were hav-hav-having an arg-arg-arg-um-um...fight." If Lacius wasn't suspicious of Quirrell, he'd have scoffed at his attempt to speak a three-syllable word. A teacher that was unable to speak properly? Ridiculous; Dumbledore truly was incompetent... or very, very dangerous.

Potter answered first, "No, sir, there was no argument; just a misunderstanding."

"May-Maybe, you shou-should go to the feast, then." Again, it sounded more like a threat than a suggestion.

"You're right, sir, we'll head there right away," Lacius said and tilted his head slightly while looking at Potter, mutely ordering him to comply.

To his surprise, the scrawny eleven-year-old added, "We were already on our way, Professor. Have a nice evening!"

"To you as well Potter. Goodnight, gentlemen."

Quirrell seemed to have no wish of joining the feast. In fact, he was headed in the opposite direction. When he was out of sight, Laciuss' head turned to Potter who seemed to be lost in thought.

"Have you noticed that he didn't stutter at all?" Again, Nev showed his uncanny ability at stating the obvious.

"True, but that's not what puzzles me. Why would he admit that he was just playing games? It doesn't make sense," the orphan commented.

"It could be a warning," Laciuss suggested, "for us to stay out of it."

"Stay out of what? When exactly did we step on his tail?"

It was so strange having a polite, somewhat meaningful conversation with Potter.

"I did, earlier. I caught him when he was researching in the library. On ancient Greek mythology, or rather... three headed dogs." The Boy Who Lived didn't exactly know why he told him this. Maybe, it was because his idiot of a brother had already spilled the secret. Maybe, it was because he wanted another opinion...

"Oh... That makes sense," was Potter's quiet response.

"He doesn't seem to be very fond of you either," Laciuss noted.

For the first time, he heard the smaller boy laugh. It was sardonic and almost bitter.

"Yeah, well...Adults generally aren't."

His teachers seemed to like him well enough. What was his damage?

"Be careful around him," Potter said serenely. "He looks harmless, but I don't think he is."

"He definitely hides something, but don't you think you give him too much credit?" He didn't trust the Defence teacher, he was most

definitely not what he pretended to be, but Laciuss refused to be afraid of the wizard.

"No, I really don't," the other boy answered somberly. Right before the Great Hall's entrance, Potter stopped.

"Aren't you coming?" Neville spoke up for the first time.

"I don't celebrate Halloween. It does have its advantages, yes, but it's nothing I ever celebrated. Besides, as your brother so kindly reminded me, I really have no reason to now."

If one looked at it that way...

"Enjoy your evening. Good night!"

To Laciuss' surprise, he was addressed as well.

"Bye, Harry!" Nev said as he watched his friend leave.

"Yes, bye," Laciuss added thoughtfully then he looked at his brother, "Come on, let's eat."

Time to celebrate the day he'd saved the world.

'He is suspicious...He must be taken out,' the ubiquitous voice whispered quietly.

"But, Master...I can't. The staff... He is too well protected..."

'Then make sure nobody notices.' His soul burned whenever he heard that voice.

"But, the stone...?"

'Use your head, you fool!'

He was puzzled, but his master was not. He who was unfaultable, of course, he was not. Once again, he gave him a glimpse of his great mind. Quirrell closed his eyes in reverie as a rush of power and brilliance entered his consciousness.

He opened his eyes and knew just how to do it.

Nobody would see it coming.

Elated, he laughed into the silence of his quarters.

'So not my day...' Harry thought as he left the classroom. It was Wednesday and he felt as if hit by a car. Ever since his surprising encounter with Laciús on Halloween almost two weeks ago, Quirrell had dropped all pretenses. He was openly messing with his head. Not obvious enough for others to catch up on, but while a few weeks ago Harry could have speculated he was just seeing things; he was now convinced that Quirrell was extracting memories from his mind. Sitting at the very back of the classroom and avoiding all eye contact helped, but the things Harry was reminded of left him raw and irritable. If the Defence teacher saw half the things he'd seen in those three lessons, he knew far too much.

Of course, the young boy's short temper had been noticed by his peers. At first, the girls had tried to make him talk, but after he'd snapped at them Susan had told him in no uncertain terms (and quite a few tears in her eyes) that he did not have to talk to them again as long as he did not apologize. Millicent had been the victim of his irritation as well, which was the reason why neither she nor Blaise talked to him. After a rather catastrophic joint breakfast, the kids from Gryffindor decided to leave Harry alone until he decided to see the idiocy of his behaviour (Apparently. Ron's temper was almost as bad as his when he was tense, he'd noticed).

The only person that was not impressed by Harry's antics was Theo. Obviously familiar with bouts of bitterness and anger; he'd only shrugged after Harry asked him whether he too wanted to know things that were "none of your bloody business".

'Hell, no!' he'd answered. 'I have no intention of testing if you can make me cry as well.'

It had taken the wind out of Harry's sails quicker than anyone could say 'brat'.

That had happened last Friday and Harry was still thinking about how he could possibly resolve the issue. He didn't fail people he was fond of often and when he did, he usually felt so bad he was at complete loss what to do next. He knew he should apologize, but

how? What particularly puzzled him was how to approach them. At home, he was so close to his friends, things usually resolved themselves. After he'd broken off Char's fight with Kai, Char had been livid. They hadn't spoken for three days. He'd been pissed at Char and vice versa. Then, all of a sudden, he'd stood in his brother's room after a particularly vicious nightmare and, without saying a word to each other, they'd been friends again.

He sincerely doubted that would work in this case and neither Millicent nor Susan would come to him first. What if they just slammed his own words into his face? ('Could you please, just for one second, leave me the hell alone?' Only he hadn't phrased it quite so politely.) He'd certainly deserve it. So it was, he spent most days alone, sat at the very back of the classroom and avoided eye-contact.

Of course, this was noticed by his teachers. First to approach them was Professor Sprout who had the uncanny ability at spotting disharmony within her house. Other teachers such as Professor Flitwick, McGonagall, perhaps even Snape, could have urged her to do interfere as well. They'd all noticed the tension within the group of first-year Badgers.

Yesterday afternoon, their Head of House had called the entire class into her office, hoping to end their fight.

It wasn't that he'd meant to stay silent. Or avoid any kind of eye-contact.

It wasn't that he disliked Professor Sprout (it was impossible not to think fondly of the cheerful woman), or that he didn't appreciate her efforts.

It wasn't that he'd planned on walking out the second his Head of House asked him if there was anything he wanted to get off his chest.

When Ernie had run after him, he certainly hadn't meant to tell him to get lost (again not so politely).

He'd only meant to shove Ernie away when the first fist flew. He was absolutely sure that a fistfight had been the last thing on his mind.

Certainly not up against a kid who had no experience whatsoever when it came to a serious fight!

And yet it happened. It all happened yesterday and Harry felt like crying every time he looked back.

Thank Goodness, he'd stopped once Ernie had fallen down! Ernie hadn't been hurt too badly, but without Madame Pomfrey some marks would have lingered for quite a few days. When the matron heard who'd been responsible for the injuries, she'd sent a look in Harry's direction he was unlikely ever to forget.

He hadn't been able to hold her gaze.

He'd received detention (helping Mr. Filch every evening, starting Wednesday, over the course of two weeks) and a clear warning that if he ever fought again, he would be presented to Professor Dumbledore and possibly even expelled.

He swore to himself to keep his temper under iron control from now on. He'd been able to do so for four years, he'd be able to do it again!

As if someone was insistent of adding to his misery, the employment of a goblin hadn't gone without unravelling tension within the Wizarding World and therefore Hogwarts itself.

Monday after they'd been introduced to Professor Taylok, the front-page of the Daily Prophet had shown the painting of traditional goblin warriors: grim and proud they had viewed the painter, carrying daggers and swords to display power, their excellence at creating weapons sharper than any human was able to forge, and their wealth. They'd looked downright frightening, even to Harry (who'd never once seen such a goblin outside of the paintings Kertak had shown him).

'WILL THE GOBLINS STRIKE AGAIN?'

It seemed like a very distasteful joke at first. Harry wasn't the person to know something by heart he'd only read once, but the article seemed to have burned into the back of his mind.

"Ever since the end of the last rebellion, several assaults on wizards and witches committed by goblins have been reported..."

Even worse were the people who'd been interviewed on the subject.

'It is appalling that our children, the future of the Wizarding World, are taught by shifty creatures such as goblins. Their half-truths will only confuse those innocent young souls.' Marlene Bloxam, granddaughter of Beatrix Bloxam, stated in her utter worry.

'I don't think it's wise to let goblins infiltrate Hogwarts.' (Nicolas Spector, former markswizard of the Magical Law Enforcement Squad).

Harry had shivered as he was reading the words 'Magical Law Enforcement Squad' and Theo— who was the only person he still talked to willingly — had done nothing to ease his mind.

'Those are specially trained Aurors.' Harry had stumbled across the term a few weeks back. Apparently, Aurors were something like the Wizarding World's secret service agents: hardcore coppers. 'Pretty much the elite of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, dozens of Aurors apply to being accepted there every year but only a handful makes it.'

'And Susan's aunt is their boss?' Harry had asked, his heart pounding in his chest.

'Kind of...Yes.' He'd said after a moment's hesitation. 'No need to be afraid, though,' (Harry's indignant reply at 'being afraid' was promptly ignored), 'Amelia Bones won't be sending the squad after insensitive pricks who hurt her niece.'

That wasn't what he was afraid of — at least not the only thing he was afraid of: he'd done things — seen things — that could get him into serious trouble with any kind of law enforcement, magical or not. However, non-magical law enforcement couldn't catch him (well, he'd sworn to himself never to get caught ever again) and didn't have the means to prove the things he'd done. He was quite sure that magical law enforcement was capable of managing both.

The article didn't say much else, except that the Ministry of Magic didn't seem to be too fond of Professor Dumbledore's idea. Harry

found it rather peculiar that the reporter who'd written the article – Rita Skeeter – seemed to severely dislike everyone she'd mentioned in the article, from members of the Ministry (he knew for instance that Cedric's father was named Amos Diggory, neither Amos Bigot (first column) nor Shamos Diggory (third column)) to Dumbledore (foolish, already showing first symptoms of senile decay) to goblins ('overpaid book-keepers' was the friendliest term she'd used).

It didn't take him long to detest the woman. Theo had asked him to write some of the words down he'd used to vent. Thanks to that talk, the letter he'd sent to Kertak that evening didn't sound quite as distressed and angry as the one he'd written right after reading the paper. Kertak had to be furious already, there was no need to put fuel in the fire. He was yet waiting for a reply.

He hated how his temper was so close to the surface these days, he'd had less trouble remaining calm around Sullivan, though fear had played an important role there. Normally, he'd discuss this with Kertak and Char, but as they weren't here and he didn't feel comfortable writing it down, he felt rather alone.

Upside to the whole mess was that Theo was definitely becoming a partner in crime if not an actual friend in Harry's terms. Theo, who was a bit of a loner, obviously started to feel comfortable around him as well. There hadn't been any meaningful conversations since the one they'd had a few weeks ago, but they got along really well.

Harry was so caught up in his musings, he almost missed the right turn to reach the Transfigurations classroom hadn't one of the walls reminded him. He truly enjoyed Professor McGonagall's classes, but the icy atmosphere caused by the tension within the Badger's ranks made this class everything but a joyful experience. Ten minutes into gloomy silence and the stern Transfiguration teacher decided that enough was enough, "For Merlin's sake! Miss Bones, if you continue to glare at Mr. Potter like this he might actually catch fire! Same goes for you, Mr. Finch-Fletchley. Whatever your disagreement is about, it is starting to interfere with my class and therefore I demand of you to tell me what is going on!"

"Nothing, Professor McGonagall," the class muttered in unison.

"Well, I would say that yesterday's happenings cannot be called nothing," she replied severely. Her lips had formed a very thin line

and Harry's heart dropped. She'd heard about the debacle with Ernie?

"I'm sorry about that," he said quietly. All eyes were on him in an instant. He hadn't really talked to anyone with the exception of Theo, definitely not out of his own volition. He took a shuddering breath and looked at Ernie directly, "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to...." He tried to explain himself, but his lips seemed to have sealed up. His eyes focused back on his table, shoulders slightly hunched.

Why? Why was it so hard to form a full sentence all of a sudden? Ernie had thrown the first punch; he'd ended the fight just like he'd done it dozens of times before.

Only... Ernie wasn't his adversary, he was his classmate.

Only... he'd provoked the stupid fight in the first place. He'd wanted to fight.

Only... Ernie had nothing to do with the whole thing.

"You didn't mean to?" Sally-Anne asked, clearly scandalized. "You punched Ernie several times! You punched him so hard he fell down!"

'Hey, I didn't kick him once he was down, that should count for something,' his cynical side wanted to throw back at the girl. He was able to bite back the reply, if only due to Hannah's heartbroken gaze.

"What's going on Harry?" Eloise asked, sounding so sad he didn't even think of snarling at her.

As he opened his mouth, Susan spoke up, "And don't you dare say nothing for there is obviously something that's bothering you."

If they thought he'd talked with an adult present they were more gullible than he'd have ever suspected. If Professor McGonagall too started bugging him about the whole talking thing, he'd scream...

"Enough!"

What? Incredulously, he looked at Gryffindor's Head of House.

"We will now focus on Transfiguration. As your Wednesday afternoons do not contain any classes, you have more than enough time to spend a few hours of it in detention," she stated calmly.

"All of us?" Justin asked, completely flabbergasted.

"No, only Mr. Potter, Miss Bones and Miss Perks. The rest of you are free to spend your afternoon as you choose."

Harry could swear he saw Professor McGonagall's eyes light up as every first-year Hufflepuff stood in front of her two hours later. As she told them to step inside a room she called 'trophy room' Harry couldn't help but tense up, which annoyed him to no end. As they surveyed the considerable size of the room (much to Harry's relief) they were explained that it was their job to clean the trophies. Whatever was left would be part of Harry's detention with Filch. Slightly bemused, they noticed that Professor McGonagall was inclined to leave the room.

"Professor?"

"I have classes to attend. I think my instructions are clear. I will take a look at your progress in two hours." Just like that, she summoned some cleaning devices out of nowhere and was gone an instant later.

Silence befell the room as soon as the door closed.

Harry took a bottle of Mrs. Skower's Magical Silver Polish, a cloth and started to work immediately. He wasn't naïve; he knew what the whole assignment was about.

He wasn't the only one who'd caught up.

"Harry... What the heck is going on?" Susan's voice sounded exasperated and worried at the same time.

He bit his own tongue in order to keep himself from speaking the words that threatened to escape. He started to polish the medal feverishly.

"Did something happen to your family?" Hannah asked with her eyes full of worry. "Did Richard or Sara or... Well, anyone in your family get hurt?"

Only fast reflexes saved the medal from falling.

Hannah had somehow refused to call Char... well, Char. Of course, that wasn't the reason why Harry stared at her. Never in his entire life had he met an Other who truly understood that all those kids in the orphanage were family. Even after explaining as well as he could, they just never truly got it. And here was Hannah (the rest, too, even Sally-Anne, for pity's sake!) asking after his family's health because he was acting strangely.

"No, they're all okay," he said slowly after regaining something he was capable of naming composure. He then added bluntly, "Quirrell is driving me bonkers."

"You really think he's dangerous." Justin did not believe him, which he found completely understandable. It did sound crazy.

"I used to think he was. I know he is now." For a second, he hesitated before he decided to add, "Lacius Longbottom thinks so as well."

Susan stared at him, but she didn't comment on it. Ernie, Justin and Sally-Anne were all ears all of a sudden. Mention the Boy Who Lived's opinions and the world was ready to believe it, too. Harry wouldn't complain about that now though. It gave him a chance to explain... and apologize again.

"Ernie, I am sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you..."

"It was me who threw the first punch, let's not forget that," Ernie answered, sounding almost proud to have taken on Harry, even though he'd gotten his arse kicked rather soundly. "Next time you tell me to...leave you alone," His cheeks turned bright red as he clearly remembered the words Harry had used, "I'll do just that. Or I'll hex you before punching you in the face."

Harry grinned and retorted cheekily, "I'd like to see you try." Four years in Hell and he'd forgotten how good it felt to banter with contemporaries when there was no real threat behind it.

"Boys!" Eloise exclaimed and everybody laughed.

"Let's get to work and you, Harry, you talk," Susan ordered.

Harry told off his encounter with Neville and Laciús. While he left off quite a bit (that is to say everything that had to do with memories) of what Quirrell was doing, he told them of what he knew about Legilimency.

Minutes later, they either worked in silence, talked about nonsense and school, everything but Quirrell.

She opened the door carefully so she wouldn't disrupt anything.

"I warn you, Ernie! If you dare..." A splash of water and a girly squeal was enough indication for Professor McGonagall to know that Mr. Macmillan indeed dared. She peaked inside the room and saw Eloise Midgen running after her attacker with a bucket full of soap water. She saw Harry and Miss Bones giggle while they were still focused on polishing medals. Miss Perks and Mr. Finch-Fletchley helped Eloise trapping Mr Macmillan into a corner.

With a smile, the Transfiguration teacher retreated and just as she wanted to close the door, she noticed that Lily's son had caught up on her presence. For a moment, he just looked at her then he nodded with that careful smile she'd seen a couple of times. Flabbergasted, she returned the gesture and slipped out of the room.

"And," Pomona asked her, her normally joyful face displayed multiple feelings: worry, hope and distress.

"Mission accomplished," Professor McGonagall merely replied with a smile.

"Thank you."

"Anytime, Pomona. Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, please. Better yet, how about dinner in Hogsmeade? My treat. I would love to drink a glass of wine. After all, it is Severus who has corridor duty tonight, isn't it?"

"Indeed, it is. That'd be lovely. Eight o'clock in front of the Great Hall. Does this sound acceptable? We haven't been doing anything for ourselves lately."

"Let's make it half an hour later, Minnie. My Venomous Tentacula has been a bit temperamental and I want some time to rid my hair off all dirt before showing my face in Hogsmeade."

"It's a date."

"Oh, if only..." Pomona sighed and the Transfiguration teacher managed to suppress a girly giggle. Her old friend was definitely in dear need of a man in her life. Unfortunately, it wasn't easy to have a partner while spending a major part of the year at a school in another part of the country. There were only few who were able to find an appropriate balance between their profession and their private life. It wasn't a coincidence either that all Heads of House were single.

Pomona grew uncharacteristically serious as she continued, "Is everything alright? Have you found out anything?"

"No. I'm afraid I haven't," she replied truthfully.

"If only I knew what's bothering Harry. Except for whatever was bothering him these past few days, he's such a kind, polite kid, but... I have no idea how to talk to him." Minerva could only nod. She knew how much this distressed Pomona for she was usually very close to her students and connected to them easily. It was a quality that Minerva envied and she wasn't ashamed to admit that. On the other hand, most members of the Hufflepuff House (and Ravenclaw) were somehow easier to access emotionally than the average member of Gryffindor or Slytherin. At least, this was her personal observation based on more than thirty years of experience.

As they met as planned a few hours later, she had to smile when Pomona told her that the children had cleaned up the entire trophy room, so James' son wouldn't have to do it alone with Argus.

"What task has Argus ready for him now?"

"Apparently, there is quite a mess in the dungeons thanks to Peeves."

"Wonderful," Professor McGonagall sighed. That would put Argus in a very bad mood. Maybe, she should tell Severus to keep an eye on

them, but then she didn't know what he thought of James' and Lily's son. Apparently, the decision of mixing Gryffindors with Hufflepuffs and Slytherins with Ravenclaws had led to an impressive decrease of tension within Potions class... Or at least, she'd received by far less complaints from furious parents who were unwilling to accept Severus' rather direct approach of teaching than she had with any other group of First Years for the past decade. Nevertheless, Harry did not strike her as someone to complain to any adult, though, and Severus did not talk much about his greatest rival's son. In fact, he hadn't commented on the boy's rude behaviour around seven weeks ago at all, hadn't even let him serve any detention, had only taken (a fair amount of) points. He'd firmly refused to discuss the matter. She was just about cancelling dinner plans so she could check on Argus and Harry, when Pomona continued.

"Argus didn't seem very happy to have a student help him... You know how much he enjoys ordering them around when he's got the chance... In fact, when he heard that Harry would be serving detention with him, he seemed a little... I'm not sure, Minerva, but he almost looked scared."

Of course, as Gryffindor's Head of House, she'd heard about the interaction between Argus, Severus, and Harry in detail from several students, foremost from Mr. Weasley.

"Do you think there might be something to what Albus said yesterday?"

Angrily, Minerva turned around; fixing her with the kind of glare she used to keep the Weasley twins under control.

"No, absolutely not. "

She respected Albus very much. To tell the truth, he probably belonged to those people she respected the most. In Harry's case, he was wrong, though. When they'd first encountered Harry, they'd both been worried about what kind of child he was and they'd both agreed on the child's good heart. Now... Harry's disagreement with Mr. Macmillan, as well as his encounter with Argus and the boy's quiet behaviour lately alarmed Albus by far more than it alarmed her.

The three of them (Head of House, Deputy Headmistress and Headmaster) had discussed the matter, mainly because Pomona felt

unable to choose a proper punishment for Harry's attack on a student.

'I was afraid Harry's past might catch up on him. He's had a violent life. A life like his leaves its mark... and is capable of damaging a young soul,' he'd frowned thoughtfully.

Pomona asked if there was something she needed to know, but Albus decided not to tell her of Harry's horrifying experiences, had only told her to keep her eyes open. Minerva couldn't say that this pleased her. Just like his mother, he was too observant for his own good. He'd notice Pomona's change of behaviour instantly and if he felt observed, he might never come to trust her. She'd revealed her fears to Albus after Pomona left, but he had remained relentless (downright stubborn in her opinion).

'Minerva, Pomona needs to know that there is potential danger...' he started severely, but she wouldn't have any of this.

'He's a little boy, Albus! I by far prefer him showing bouts of temper than remaining as stoically calm as he has in the beginning.'

'Violence...'

'...Is not acceptable. I agree and he needs to understand that he's not a street fighter, but, honestly Albus, he's just a little boy and he is just about to realize that he's just that. Corner him and he'll never learn to trust any adult.'

'He's also a highly capable and powerful wizard, as all of the teachers have agreed. Also, he shows signs of the Influence, quite remarkably so.'

Now that was something she had not expected.

'Indeed?'

'Yes. And you may guess what element is particularly responsive around him.'

All of a sudden, she felt cold. With trembling hands, she covered her mouth.

'You don't think...'

"If scared enough or worried about the safety of his friends..." Yes, I do think he lit that house on fire.'

Strangely enough, it almost gave her hope.

'Nobody was hurt, not even that...' (Needless to say she'd used an expression that would lead to the loss of several House points if coming from a student).

'Indeed,' Albus concurred. 'Also, he has true friends at the orphanage, he doesn't seem to be a loner by nature. Nevertheless, he shows alarming tendencies in temper...'

'No less than the average teenager and he might as well be that now, since he was practically an adult when he came here and has yet to learn how to be a child,' she protested forcefully.

'...and the need to point out his dominance over less gifted students...' he continued as if he hadn't heard her.

'What exactly are you talking about? Besides, the same could be said about Laciús...' she fumed, completely ignoring the fact that she was talking about one of her own cubs.

'This isn't about Laciús, Minerva,' Albus interrupted, as always not willing to discuss the Boy Who Lived. 'I'm talking about intimidating Marcus Flint to the point he...'

'Oh, for Merlin's sake, Albus! The boy's a bully,' she exclaimed, completely running out of patience. 'He has half of the younger students petrified and now he has met one that won't back down to his pressure. Whatever Harry did, there was no physical damage done.'

'Do not let your memories of James and Lily cloud your judgment too much, my dear. I know you loved them and he seems like them in spirit as well as looks, but he is not like them. Their lives couldn't have been any more different.'

'All the more reason to make sure he has a better life from now on! He does not deserve this kind of suspicion, Albus, it isn't fair.'

Their conversation had lasted a little longer, neither really giving in. She'd gone to her quarters very frustrated that evening. Thankfully, Albus had sent his letter to Remus Lupin a few days before this disaster. She wasn't convinced he'd have sent it now.

To see that Albus' mistrust affected good-hearted Pomona filled her with sorrow. She hoped to convince her otherwise until Saturday. By then, Albus would have returned from his Wizengamot duties, and she'd be able to breathe again once her Deputy Headmistress didn't threaten to drown her as they usually did when he wasn't in the castle.

As Professors McGonagall and Sprout made their way to Hogsmeade, Harry couldn't wait for detention to be over. He was on edge to the point he felt like the walls were echoing his tension. Filch didn't do much, actually, but he was in the room (which the bastard had locked as soon as they'd entered to 'keep him from running away like all those Hufflepuff cretins always tried') and that was enough to make Harry tremble.

It wasn't that Harry was truly afraid of him, but he really didn't want the teachers' focus on him any more than he already did. It seemed like Filch knew that.

Oh, Filch didn't dare to do any physical damage, but he kept muttering about how Harry was in trouble, how he'd get himself expelled before the year ended and how he'd rejoice once this happened.

When Filch finally unlocked the door, he practically fled the dungeons and he didn't really care where his feet carried him. He intended to grill Peeves about causing such a mess tomorrow. Right now, he just wanted to go to bed and forget that tomorrow he'd be exposed to Filch once more.

He was just about to turn around yet another corner (the amount of corners in this castle still surprised him) when a searing hot warning coming from the walls caused him to hide within the shadows.

He heard voices whispering to each other. One of them was Professor Snape's low voice. The other one he hardly recognized for it was usually more high-pitched and disrupted by a distinct stutter...

A/N: First of all, I am truly sorry. I was suffering from tandem-writing disease... That is to say, when I wanted to write I didn't have time (real life was being a... let's just say I had little time at hand) and when I had some time off, I was usually recharging my batteries and was too exhausted to write. Anyway, I'm back with a new chapter (and I hope there is still someone out there interested in this story) and I'm already writing on its continuation, so hopefully my next update won't take as long.

Second of all, thanks to all those people who offered their Beta duties to me. It was touching to receive so many offers.

OTruestBlue0, thank you so much for correcting this update so quickly and thanks again for being my beta.

As always, a big "thank you" to every person that left a review.

Chapter 14, Part Two: Night of the Dead, Dead of Night

A/N: Profanity Warning. I've used profanity before, and I think my rating is still sufficient, even after this chapter. However, some cuss words are used a bit more often than usual for this story. If somebody thinks I should rate this story "M" instead of "T", please inform me and - if your points are valid - I will do so.

"... And I cannot help but wonder where your loyalties lie, Severus," the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher whispered in a low voice. The Potions professor didn't seem at all disturbed by the sudden disappearance of his colleague's speech impairment.

"You are meddling with powers you cannot possibly begin to understand, Quirrell," Snape's face was as much a mask as his voice was icy. It caused the hair on the back of Harry's neck to stand up.

Cold, sharp laughter was the response, "I beg to differ, Severus. You are the one who has no idea who you're dealing with..." Faster than Harry was able to follow, Quirrell grabbed the taller man's left arm, right where Harry'd felt that strange mark before. The Potions Master gave a pained, muffled gasp as his knees gave out.

Quirrell took a small step back, let go of the other wizard's arm and whispered menacingly, "It seems you have forgotten whom you serve."

Harry had no idea what this was about. The look of unconcealed horror on Professor Snape's face told him that the older wizard knew exactly what was going on.

"Help me," the Defence teacher commanded and Harry – who'd always believed the Potions teacher to be the more powerful of the two wizards – saw with astonishment that the taller wizard was petrified. "Or die."

All emotion vanished, his face assumed a cold, indifferent mask, and Snape held Quirrell's gaze. What happened next, Harry couldn't quite follow. All he knew was that an instant later the black-cloaked, thin man was somehow standing with his wand ready (though Harry had not seen it drawn), but the Defence teacher grabbed Snape's left arm again and whispered 'Servus!'

For a split second, Harry thought he'd mispronounced the name, but when he saw Snape's knees give out again, his normally impassive expression distorted by pain, the eleven-year-old was sure it had to have been some kind of spell. If possible, he retreated further into the safe shadows that the castle provided.

'You want to be unseen, become invisible.' Sully had told him.

'If grown-ups decide to rip each other's throats out, hide.' Sully's other protégés had told him. When adults fought, whether they were drunk or sober, weapons drawn or not, it was always nasty. Harry wasn't foolish enough to get in between. He dearly hoped the Potions professor would win this, though. The fact that Quirrell's wand was pointed right between Snape's eyes didn't fill him with confidence, however.

"You will not die such an easy death," the wizard whispered and flicked his wand twice...

Harry saw Snape scream in agony this time, but there was no sound. He looked away and backed even further into the shadows, while making sure he wasn't putting himself into a corner. He didn't make himself small either (a common mistake, as most of the time cowering led to getting caught), but he bit into the back of his right hand so he wouldn't make any noise. When Quirrell lowered his wand, the Potions Master was barely conscious (and Harry forced himself to keep his hand pressed against his lips, so his breathing pattern didn't change). Yet, Snape did not falter, his gaze firmly fixed upon Quirrell.

"Traitors never do," Quirrell continued, as if there hadn't been a torture session in between his words. "Yet, you are lucky, Severus. We do not have time to deal with you right now. Do not try to flee for we will find you." He gave another flick of his wand and Snape crumbled. Only Quirrell's earlier words told Harry that the still form on the ground was still alive. The Defence teacher levitated the unconscious Potions Master into a storeroom nearby and magically locked the door.

As Quirrell walked away, and Harry was forced to wait until Quirrell had gone far enough that he could attempt to open the door without being caught, Harry's thoughts drifted.

'We?' Wonderful, just wonderful, he wasn't just dealing with a sadistic maniac; he was dealing with a sadistic maniac who suffered from multiple personality disorder as well.

'So not my day...'

He waited a few more minutes after the walls told him of Quirrell's absence before he rushed forward. Not daring to risk being heard, he whispered, "Professor Snape? Professor?"

He approached the wooden door and tried to open it manually, which, of course, didn't work. The door opened towards the hall which meant he couldn't push it either. (Been there, done that. Only way of breaking inside would lead to lots of splinters, and given the size of the storeroom, Snape could get seriously hurt.) He didn't know how to pull (been there, tried and failed)... That left only one option.

'Sorry, Sully. I know you weren't too happy when you found out I'd learned to pick locks,' he thought wistfully, reached into his cloak and extracted the piece of thick wire he'd been carrying around instead of his pocket-knife for the past month after Linda had privately told him that carrying weapons on Hogwarts' grounds wasn't allowed.

It took him nearly ten minutes to bend the wire enough to pick the lock (he checked every other minute to see whether or not Quirrell was coming back to finish the job). A small cry of triumph escaped him when the lock finally clicked.

'It's a handy skill, though.'

He ripped the door open and sighed in relief when he saw that Snape was still breathing (though also still unconscious). He approached the wizard cautiously, ready to bolt should he wake up and decide that his surroundings weren't safe.

Hands shaking, he checked pulse, breathing patterns, and for any obvious injuries. Everything checked out fine, other than that the man's left arm was searing hot. Carefully, so as not to touch skin, he ripped Snape's sleeve open and scrambled back in horror.

A tattoo was there.

It was a horrifying tattoo of a skull with a serpent protruding from its mouth like a tongue.

The patch of skin that was tattooed and the surrounding area were bright red as if infected and Harry carefully touched it in order to find out whether he could feel anything.

'Bad idea,' was his last thought before he collapsed.

His entire body felt like it was on fire, and he swallowed repeatedly to try to suppress the urge to give into the nausea he felt. His attempts failed a few seconds later and he was grateful that he hadn't eaten much at dinner (despite Trinky's insistence). He wasn't quite sure what he'd just seen, as the images had appeared and vanished too swiftly. The feeling those images had caused was familiar to him, however: terror.

Opening your eyes in the middle of the night feeling smothered only to look into Sullivan's face... Then waking up for real with a muffled scream on your lips.

Shivering limbs and gasping for breath, only to be put underwater again. Feeling a skull-cracking headache while trying not to panic too much... Water in the airways was just painful.

Pressing a hand into flesh to stop Simon's wound from bleeding, shaking with fear... Calling for help that wouldn't come.

A never-ending nightmare.

Whatever he'd seen promised just that.

For one moment, all he wanted to do was run. To leave Professor Snape right where he was and to pray to whatever the bloody hell was bigger than he was to keep his Potions teacher safe. A painful moan from the grown wizard forced him to keep it together.

"Professor, can you hear me?" he whispered, still not daring to risk attracting the attention of anything or anyone around him. "Sir?"

Clearly not entirely capable of moving his limbs, the man's twitching right hand told him that he was at least regaining consciousness (fluttering eyelids and a steady pulse confirmed this initial assessment).

Around the same time as Snape began to slowly wake up, the heat emanating from Snape's mark seemed to fade away just as slowly.

"Let's get you to some help, sir," Harry stated as calmly as possible. "But you need to help me." Still not entirely aware of what was going on around him, Snape seemed to realize that the small form trying to get him on his feet wasn't an enemy and he complied as well he could. As the underage wizard helped his teacher stand up, he took the opportunity to carefully glance at the mark (without being in danger of accidentally touching it). The colour was slowly fading into nothingness.

As he'd noticed before, the Potions professor was disconnected from the mark on his forearm (yet, Harry realized with a shudder, it had almost killed him). However, the 'cold heat' was no longer just 'cold heat': it was spreading through the older wizard's body like a disease. Professor Snape was barely capable of moving his limbs, and trying to help a man twice your size go anywhere was strenuous. They couldn't have moved more than a couple of feet before they stopped again. Thankfully, as they walked on, the strength in Snape's legs seemed to return and the weight Harry was forced to carry seemed to lessen considerably, yet still was nearly too much for him.

"The Stone..." were the teacher's first words. His voice croaked.

"Don't talk, sir. Everything's going to be..." He was interrupted as a short but late wave of heat told him to stop, and Snape's forehead painfully collided with a stone candleholder that was standing in the dark corner he'd meant to go around. Harry grimaced and fixed the walls with a stern glare as they emitted that familiar feeling of apologetic amusement at his clumsiness.

"Sorry, sir. You're not exactly a light-wei..." he cleared his throat as he reminded himself that this wasn't some kid he was talking to but a teacher he'd (hopefully) keep for the next seven years.

"Help... You need to..." Snape gasped, but he couldn't finish his sentence as a coughing fit overcame him. His eyes were closed, his breathing pattern slow and quiet, but judging by the way his jaw was set, the tall man was in agonizing pain. There was nothing Harry could do about that as he'd no idea what was causing it. Or rather, he knew and didn't dare looking deeper into it.

"Sir, Quirrell might not be anywhere near, but I'll be damned before I risk calling his attention. So, we're going quietly to the Hospital Wing." He couldn't suppress a shudder when he thought of what would happen if they were suddenly face to face to Quirrell... While he was sure the walls would warn him, a gnawing feeling of undiluted helplessness overcame him. He couldn't just leave Snape, but on the other hand he'd be in real danger facing that other wizard. He wondered just how exactly he always managed to ... He sighed. There was no point in dwelling on it.

He lost track of time as they slowly walked the empty corridors towards the Infirmary. Thankfully, Snape's legs did not give out as many times as in the beginning of their 'journey'. Harry's knees were throbbing from the three times they'd hit the stone floor. Once, he'd simply let Snape fall because he knew he probably wouldn't have been able to find the heart to keep moving had he damaged his knees any more (and then he profusely apologized, though he wasn't quite sure if Snape actually heard him).

Just as they were about to take the corridor that would lead to the hospital wing, he heard the echo of two or three pair of shoes running down a flight of stone stairs. From the sound of it, they were in a hurry and small: kids.

Suddenly filled with panic, Harry let Snape go (and grimaced as the tall man fell harder than he'd anticipated... without Madame Pomfrey's help the professor would definitely be feeling this trip in his knees for a couple of days) and grabbed the walls with both hands, focusing on Quirrell.

The walls remained quiet. Quirrell was nowhere near.

He then saw Hermione, Ron and Neville running down the stairs. Heart pounding in his chest he quietly ran towards them (doing his best not to make any noise) and hissed, "Quiet, guys! Slow down!" He didn't raise his voice, therefore they couldn't hear him, but his

gestures got the point across. All three of them stopped (Neville due to Ron who grabbed his cloak) and descended the stairs as quietly and swiftly as possible.

"What happened?" He could see they were trying to catch their breath. Despite red cheeks from running, they all looked pale.

"Lacius," Neville whispered, looking as if he was about to cry. "He overheard Quirrell. Apparently, Quirrell's planning on getting whatever is hidden beneath the trapdoor. Tonight! Lacius, Seamus and Dean went after him to stop him."

Harry felt like banging his head against the wall. Of all the dim-witted ideas, this was probably the most brainless he'd ever heard of. And he himself was known for acting stupidly heroic when it came to his family!

"And how come you didn't..."

"Lacius asked me to lend him my copy of *Hogwarts: A History*," Hermione replied grimly. "When I came back, he'd used the Full Body Bind spell on Ron and left, apparently together with Seamus and Dean."

Harry didn't ask what had happened to Neville. He already knew and didn't want to make Neville feel even more ashamed.

"Why didn't you inform your brothers?" he decided to ask instead, resting his gaze on Ron.

"Are you out of your mind? Percy would tell Mum. And Mum would kill me if she knew I was even thinking of breaking any Hogwarts Rules."

"Fred and George..." The twins didn't care for rules at all. They would have helped and they were more experienced with wand magic than all of them together.

"Look," Ron interrupted, sounding irritated. "We wanted to inform Professor McGonagall, but she's not in her office."

Harry cursed behind clenched teeth (receiving a scandalized "Harry!" from Hermione). His head was throbbing. What was he

supposed to do now? Neville's brother was on his way to face something he couldn't possibly fight and Harry knew he couldn't fight Quirrell either. On the other hand, there was Snape who needed medical attention...

"Professor Snape got hurt about..." he glanced at his watch and his eyes widened, "forty minutes ago. I can't tell you what happened exactly, but Quirrell attacked him. Ron, you need to get him into the hospital wing, okay? Then you're going to fetch Professor Taylok, or some prefect that runs into you. Hell, get Filch if you can't find anyone else. Hermione, you go directly to Professor Sprout and Neville, you go to Professor Flitwick. Tell them what's going on!"

As he spoke his last sentence he started moving away.

"Where are you going?" Neville asked.

"To try to keep your bloody menace of a brother from getting himself killed!" he shouted and started running. He had no chance of catching up to them in time, absolutely none whatsoever unless...

"Please, tell me there's a shortcut," he hissed under his breath and was disappointed to notice that Hogwarts led him towards the Forbidden corridor. However, a couple of exhausting minutes later, just before he reached the door that beheld a three-headed dog, (it had to be as the door emitted so much heat that Harry was sure he could see it glow), the ground shifted. Harry yelped and hurt his fingers as he waved around, trying to find something to hold on to in order to keep himself from falling. He failed and started sliding down the slippery pipe-like structure that opened beneath him. It was rougher than the slides he'd come to know in the park and it was much longer. After what felt like hours, his feet hit solid ground, followed painfully by the rest of his body. Moaning, he stood up and growled, "Thanks. But I'm no longer surprised Peeves' pranks are this rough if his mother doesn't know anything about the fragility of human beings. By 'short,' I did not mean that short," he added as an afterthought. The castle remained quiet.

Roaring silence filled the dark room he'd entered and for the first time, Harry was quite sure that this silence – this total silence without hearing the slightest, comforting whisper – was what most people normally experienced. It wasn't comfortable.

"Sorry," he mumbled under his breath and hung his head a little, wondering if that was what Char had once described as 'Mums just have a way, you know, a way to make you feel like you're the only important person in the world, but that their wellbeing is dependent on your good manners at the same time.'

The castle was more than a little reluctant to just let him walk into danger. As it was, he walked down the corridor until he stood in front of a locked door. It took him a long moment to notice that the birds fluttering above him were, in fact, keys. When he discovered the broomsticks, Harry frowned.

Why would anybody provide a tool to help someone open a door that was supposed to stay locked? It didn't make sense. He had no idea what Quirrell was after, but the whole 'Lacius overheard him planning to go through the trapdoor' was highly suspect. It nearly screamed 'trap.'

If you killed the Boy Who Defeated Lord Voldemort, what was your reward?

When a crew wanted trouble, they messed with another crew's business, but when they wanted to cause destruction they killed the enemy crew's leader. However, Lacius was hardly a leader and there were no opposing crews as far as Harry knew...

'Whenever a crew member wants to take on the leader's position, they do what their leader couldn't. That's why a leader is only fought when they display weakness. That's why you can't ever show anyone when you're weak, Harry, not even within your own ranks.'

It was a rule he'd learned after Sully's death.

It seemed like a good explanation: Quirrell wanted to kill Lacius in order to gain influence and power within Voldemort's crew. Only one question remained: what was Voldemort's crew? Maybe they were his old followers, those Death Eaters?

Or something more?

As there was no time to dwell on it, Harry forced himself to focus instead on what was right before him: a closed door, a broom, and a key waiting to be caught.

'I don't have time for this,' he thought, running out of patience. Dearly hoping that nobody was standing right on the other side of the door, he struck his open hands towards the door with as much force as he could muster and pushed.

For the first time in four years, absolutely nothing happened. The door didn't as much as twist, the walls around it were silent as if the wood obliterated all the power he'd put into his shove. He tried a second time focusing on his need to pass through.

"Ouch! Blast it!" he exclaimed hissing it pain. It was like he was trying to crush steel. Every minute he spent trying to open that bleeding door was another minute for Laciús to catch up to Quirrell. As it seemed that flying after those stupid keys would take less time than picking the lock, he decided for that tactic. However, he wished he'd had more flying lessons. What he found after unlocking the door and stepping through the doorway was a battlefield. Seamus was sitting next to a nearly unconscious Dean and within a second, he was with them. Checking for possible wounds, all he found was that Dean was suffering from a concussion. He only managed to ease the pain a little, head injuries had always puzzled him... Well, he could stop a scalp wound from bleeding, but when the head got bumped too hard there was only so much he could do for the pain. Dean had to be checked out by Madame Pomfrey. He glanced at his surroundings in confusion and asked what exactly had happened here.

When they answered him, he gaped, "You played your way through?" he asked incredulously, fixing Seamus with a glare. "So that's what happened? Dean was a chessman to be sacrificed?" Neither of them could hold his gaze.

"I'll kill him," Harry hissed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt as angry.

"It was my choice!" Dean protested, and winced a second later.

The shortest of the boys snorted, "Then you're a..." He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and tried logic. "When you came in here, did the chessboard look like this? Broken chessmen and..." and boys... Failing words he just waved a hand.

"No," Seamus said slowly, quite openly mystified.

"And you think Quirrell played his way through?"

"I'm not sure. He had to, I guess..."

"Not if you move faster than giant chessmen made of stone... Stone is a lot of things, but unless it falls or is thrown, it's always slow," he sighed and checked Dean's injury once again. "How did you get past the hound...? No, scratch that. Listen, stay here, alright?" While he spoke he moved them gently in a dark corner. "The others are alerting the teachers. They should be coming any time. But you stay hidden, alright? If you hear someone coming through that door," he motioned towards the side of the white chessmen. "You don't shout, you stay quiet and you don't breathe. Even if you see Laciús or me come through. You hear me?"

"Loud and clear," Seamus muttered, looking grim and flustered at the same time. "Laciús is pretty good at Defence. His dad taught him. You might be in the way."

Harry remembered Snape's crumbled form and shuddered, "I hope to catch him before he gets to Quirrell." As he spoke, he moved on the other side of the chessboard.

"But," he heard Dean protest. "Laciús needs to stop him! Otherwise, Quirrell will get the stone!"

Harry stopped for a moment, wondering what this was about then he decided that there simply wasn't enough time. The next room contained a dead... something, a creature. Harry felt a pang when he saw the bloody lump on the creature's head.

It was dead. It looked like a troll, but he couldn't be certain. As quickly as he could, he crossed the room. When he entered yet another room, it only contained a table with bottles, he shook his head.

It was too... easy. This wasn't true security, no eleven-year-old should be able to trespass serious security. He jumped back when strangely coloured flames sprang to life on both ends.

He was trapped. Cursing Lacijs and his own foolishness, he approached the flames that would lead him back and shuddered. The purple flames reached for him and he backed away. It was unnatural.

When he saw the riddle, he closed his eyes. His head hurt and he felt exhaustion overcome him. There was no way he could think reasonably now and that was what he had to apply here: logic.

Slowly, he dropped on his knees and tried to think how to get out of this mess.

All of a sudden, he heard a scream followed by the kind of laughter that caused the hair on the back of his neck to stand up.

Without hesitation, he jumped through unnaturally dark flames.

"Move!" he thought grimly. Fire was ever moving yet uncompromising in its restless attempt to burn whatever it touched. The only way to control it was to either snuff it out or be just like it. He bit his lips and forced himself not to inhale as he was engulfed by flames hotter and more deadly than he was used to. Thankfully, it was only for the two seconds that it took him to get through.

The first thing he saw once his vision had cleared was a tall figure hovering over a small one. Swiftly he approached Quirrell's body from the side and pushed with all his might, and at the same time he yelled, "Lacijs, get outta here!"

He'd hoped to at least make Quirrell stagger long enough that they could attempt to flee. But the Defence teacher didn't even flinch, and as fast as he'd grabbed Snape's arm he seized Harry and smashed his body against the opposite wall. Blinking away stars, he looked up and yelled in unconcealed terror.

"What the fuck is going on here?" he asked, staring at the back of Quirrell's head into what resembled a human face with its lipless mouth turned up in an amused smile.

"It's him!" Lacijs gasped, his eyes were wide and he was obviously scared witless. "You-Know-Wh... Him!"

"Voldemort?" His blood ran cold and his heart was beating violently as he whispered the name. He didn't doubt Laciús. Strangely enough, he felt calm, almost as if he watched himself from a distance. Life threatening situations were not an entirely unfamiliar experience to him...

He had thought he'd die that one night he'd fallen into the pond in the park and yet he'd managed to survive for nearly three more years. Against all odds.

He wasn't dead yet. And he'd make it as hard as possible.

"Yes, it is," the face confirmed quietly, with a cruel smile on his face. "And you are Harry Potter. Just one of three boys I intended to kill a decade ago." Nobody should ever speak of murder so casually. "But now, you are irrelevant. It wasn't you who was marked," he paused, "at least not that night," Voldemort added as an afterthought, his red eyes drifting casually to Harry's left wrist before he caught Harry's gaze again. A merciless smile formed.

He couldn't have suppressed his flinch, even if he had suspected this.

Voldemort knew.

The killer of his parents knew one of his darkest secrets.

Hatred and Helplessness always sharpened his tongue.

"Right," he scoffed and was honestly surprised by the sarcasm he managed to muster. "I'm irrelevant." So, he wasn't the prime target. Laciús was. If he could distract them just long enough for help to come...

He dearly hoped help was coming. He was counting on Neville, Ron and Hermione. They had to get the teachers to come.

Time to see if he could still annoy his enemies to the point they forgot their initial goals.

"Coming from the bloke whose feet are looking in the wrong direction and who's got an arse instead of a stomach. All this

supposed greatness you're going for and you have to share brains with an idiot."

Stung, Quirrell turned around. Harry had hoped that some part of him was still there. He preferred fighting an adult over whatever Voldemort was. There was one relevant downside, though: Quirrell was armed.

Furiously, the wizard lifted his wand.

"No, you fool!" Voldemort wasn't an idiot. In fact, he was too perceptive. He saw right through Harry's tactics. Which meant he had to count on Quirrell's temper. "He's distracting you. Find the stone and kill Laciur Longbottom. Harry Potter can die later!" Quirrell obeyed and turned back to Neville's twin brother.

"Not the brightest bulb in the box, you've got there, hm?" Harry asked the grimace casually and managed to make Quirrell turn for him again.

Laciur wasn't stupid and saw what he was doing.

"Does that honestly surprise you?" He actually had the gall to look past Quirrell (and therefore past Voldemort's face) at Harry. "Only the daft and insane would be following a... What did he call himself earlier? Right, mere shadow and vapour."

Quirrell turned around with a roar. His face was red from pure rage.

"I don't know what disgusts me more, the back of his head or his face," Harry gave back. He knew their lives depended on equally nasty remarks that would hurt Quirrell's ego. His heart was pounding with dangerous speed and a look at Laciur's widened eyes told him that the Boy Who Lived felt the same.

The dark wizard who was in league with Voldemort himself turned around again.

"ENOUGH! Stop, you fool!" the high voice of the monster screeched. "They are distracting you. Can't you see? Do as I say, you stupid, useless vessel!"

"This is my body and I decide whom I kill first!" Quirrell screeched, looking as insane as Sullivan when he'd accused Harry of being hell's breed. Quickly, he advanced Harry, "and that boy is getting on my nerves!"

He lifted his wand and drew closer. Harry backed away until his back hit the wall. The wand tucked inside his sleeve wouldn't save him. He had no clue how to use that sufficiently.

Use the weapons you know.

Although he was cornered, he relaxed. The walls emitted warmth and tranquillity, almost as if it thought that there was no reason to fear. He wasn't alone.

Fire was too far away...

His flat hands touched the wall and he took a deep breath. Then, as quickly as he was able, his right hand shot forward and a brick followed just as fast. It precisely hit where he wanted it to.

Quirrell crumbled, his hands covering his most sensitive body parts.

'Fool-proof way to knock out blokes,' Alex would say with a nasty smile on her face. Harry didn't stop there. This was serious and he wouldn't count on luck.

His left hand, which still touched the walls, moved further to the left then he let another brick loose. It moved slower as it came from the wall to his left, not the one he was directly in contact with. Still, the brick collided with the right side of Quirrell's face hard enough to knock him out, giving them the time they needed to bolt.

He hoped.

He moved around, forcing himself not to look to find out whether or not Voldemort had been knocked out too, and grabbed Laci's sleeve. The other boy was dangerously pale.

"Let's get out of here!"

Neville's brother didn't agree, though. He stubbornly refused to move. "He's after the stone!"

"What stone?" Harry hissed irritably, trying to pull Laciús along. For a boy who looked so small, he was rather strong.

Laciús proved both his foolishness and his perceptiveness in unfamiliar situations when he took a step forward and pushed Harry back. The smaller boy stumbled back, incredulous.

"The Philosopher's Stone, it will let him restore his powers. We can't let that happen."

Harry nearly growled in frustration.

"As soon as he recovers, he'll kill us! Come on!"

But it was too late, they'd hesitated too long. Apparently, wizards recover faster than coppers.

The walls almost shouted their warning and Harry grabbed Laciús, flattening them both to the ground. Something fiery hot flew just above his head, and fear coursed through Harry.

Never before had he been attacked by a wizard with murderous attempt.

A fully trained wizard on top of that.

Of course, he stood no chance. He looked down at Laciús who seemed to be struggling with consciousness. Harry must have used too much force.

He rose from the ground quickly, but Quirrell's wand was already pointed right between his eyes. They were five feet apart.

He'd be dead before he made his first move.

"Wait," Voldemort's voice commanded his servant lazily. Was there amusement in his high voice?

"You are a fighter, aren't you? Just like your parents were. Your father so proudly faced me, but he was no match for the power of Lord Voldemort."

Harry wasn't exactly known to back down when situation was dire and quipped boldly, "Hey, Ugly-face! You want to talk about my parents," he pressed his lips together with barely suppressed fury, "People you murdered in cold blood? Face me while doing so!"

"Of course," Voldemort continued, as if he hadn't heard. "Your mother wouldn't have had to die at all. All she had to do was step away, but she refused. She died protecting the three of you."

Quirrell's face twitched for a moment, but he didn't say anything. He looked completely indifferent when a tear fell down Harry's face.

"So brave. So foolish. You most definitely are their son." Harry stood a little straighter. "Now, as earth seems to be so closely in touch with you, you will be able to tell me where the stone is."

Harry withdrew. How did he know that?

'Stay calm,' he forced himself, 'You can fall apart later!'

If only there was a later.

"To your left, to your right... We are in some underground chamber of the size of a regular classroom. It is a given we are kind of surrounded by stone."

Quirrell moved his wand and Harry was on his knees, his face turned to the right.

The bastard could hit him without touching him!

He blinked to disperse the stars, but was unable to. That one hit had resulted in a concussion.

With hands and knees on the ground, he felt it, the quiet trembling of several feet pounding on the stone floor not too far away.

Help was coming! All he had to do was stall Voldemort and his slave.

"Don't be so disrespectful, boy!" Quirrell hissed. "Tell my master where the stone is."

"Pretty much where I said it was," Harry replied, his voice void of all emotion.

"The Philosopher's Stone, Potter!" Quirrell nearly shouted in mounting anger.

"Probably with a philosopher," Harry said dead-panned. He knew what he was doing: he was provoking a violent adult. He knew that he was in for it.

The alternative was instant death and help would be here any minute.

'Look, kid... Beatin's hurt, give ya that. But it won't kill ya. And you gotta survive, that's what we do.'

He'd promised himself so hard that he wouldn't let anybody hurt him again, that he would never be forced to let Matt's rules come into play. But, there was simply no way around it this time.

He forced himself to show a provocative grin, literally assuming a tongue-in-cheek-like expression. And he lifted his right hand, almost lazily pointing two fingers at him in a clear gesture.

It worked.

Harry wanted to cry.

The first blow came, and the second, and the third. All of them in the face this time.

Sullivan had usually slapped the face, but he'd preferred hitting torso and abdomen.

Quirrell obviously didn't care. He heard Voldemort's high-pitched shouts to 'stop and focus on the more important tasks'.

His entire body hurt, not just his face, but his head too, and that almost familiar pain of a knife in his abdomen and he felt that whoever was coming was just outside the doorway.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" he heard from somewhere, but his mind shut down before he could truly register what was happening.

A/N: Life's busy, but I think you've noticed due to my irregular updates. I apologize for that. This is the best I can do for the moment, be assured of that.

Thank you so much for the kinds reviews and the support. It really motivates me to type faster. If you have questions, please PM me, though - and those who've asked questions know that - I can't always guarantee to give you a straight answer.

Last but not least: A big "thank you" and a cyber hug for my two Betas 0TruestBlue0 and DaiVath. You have done an excellent job, I'm really proud to call you guys my betas. I learn a lot.

Chapter 15: Burdens To Carry

Filius Flitwick spoke the incantation that would allow him to pass through Minerva's trap without having to catch the appropriate key. He was the first teacher the students had informed of the developing situation, and he hoped that he would be in time. Whenever the headmaster and his deputy were absent, Professor Flitwick assumed responsibility for the school. In fact, since Pomona had accompanied Minerva and Severus was injured, he'd been the only remaining Head of House. He'd instructed Mr. Longbottom to remain in his office (which he'd still occupied when the boy arrived, Atàca-dàio, as he'd wanted at least one head of house to be available if a student was injured). He didn't want the clumsy boy to roam around Hogwarts under such perilous circumstances.

Filius had known something about Quirinus had changed after he'd come back from his travels. He'd known the young wizard for twenty years, ever since Quirinus himself was a student at Hogwarts. Quirinus had always been a timid man with a slight stutter, but after he'd returned last summer, his *anêra*... his entire personality was different. He groaned when he thought what Miranda, the witch who taught Divination, would say when she heard about this; she would gloat as if her prediction that Quirinus would not last another year was significant. Anybody could predict that in the face of plain statistics! Sharply, he forced his mind to stop his useless rant. He would have preferred Sybil, but Albus had said that she had even less talent than Miranda, so they were stuck with that conceited *lâsa* until... He had to focus on more important matters. It didn't even matter that he'd so severely misjudged a colleague.

The fact remained that the stone was in danger of being stolen by Quirinus, who was obviously in league with some very dark forces; otherwise he wouldn't have stood a chance against Severus. Albus was not in the castle and the castle's only other experts on dark magic were either unconscious or represented the very danger he would have wanted them to advise him on.

His heart had nearly stopped when Mr. Longbottom told him of Laciús' intention to stop the treacherous Defence teacher's plans. This would not end well.

When he came to understand that Mr. Potter had followed the Boy Who Lived down the trapdoor, his heart finally decided to take a

short vacation. He remembered the way his throat constricted at the thought of Mr. Potter and Mr. Longbottom facing the man who'd struck down Severus. There was no way they would survive the encounter.

Ms. Granger, who'd received the task to find Pomona, had done so with a basic location spell. It had worked remarkably well and that spell was the only reason he had backup. According to Mr. Longbottom, Lily's son had told Mr. Weasley to help Severus into the Hospital Wing before going to fetch Taylok. If he wasn't in such a hurry, he would have taken time to sigh deeply. He could already see the sgrafur's facialexpression: lack of surprisemixed with insincere sympathy (not that anybody who was not an expert at reading a goblin's behaviour would see either). That look would be replaced by a sneer once they were alone and would be followed by a statement along the lines of 'Isn't it strange how everything seems to fall apart when you take charge, skorun?'.

Well, water under the bridge.

It happened. Now it was time to deal with the problem. Pomona and Minerva caught up to him as he entered the room with the giant chessboard. They quickly ran past it after Flitwick disabled his spells. He faltered a bit, wondering why the chessboard hadn't reassembled itself once the intruders moved onto the next level of security... It had been a bad idea to begin with.

He'd begged Albus to use more sophisticated protection, not... games. Now they were in this terrible mess and the headmaster wasn't around! He only hoped Quirinus was still as hopeless at applying logic as when he was younger. Thankfully, Severus had told him which flask was the correct one after he defeated the Potions Master rather cleverly in a game of chess. They passed the dead troll and he quickly picked up the right vial and poured it into the flames, which immediately extinguished.

Severus would have to come up with something new... They all would.

Oh, how he hoped that this additional work would be necessary.

Wands at the ready, they ran into the next room as they heard a child shout, "Wingardium Leviosa!"

It was a horrifying yet peculiar sight: on one hand, there was Mr. Potter on the ground, unconscious (Filius dearly wished for that to be true and rued the circumstances that would cause him to wish a child be unconscious). On the other hand, Locius Longbottom stood upright, wand ready in his hands and... he used the Floating Charm to disable Quirrell? The Defence teacher looked strange without a turban, but that wasn't it... Was there a face on the back of his head? Filius' bafflement was cut off when the spell ended and the wizard whirled around to attack the Boy Who Lived. Instantly, Minerva interposed herself between the boy and Hogwarts' Defence teacher while charging toward Quirinus with a nonverbal Stupefy. Flitwick used his personal specialty, a complex variety of the Banishing Charm, to make sure Quirinus wouldn't be able to react in time.

It worked.

Already knocked out cold, the wizard flew past Mr. Potter's body (the Charms professor made sure the boy wasn't touched in the process by using an upper-level shield charm) and was slammed against a wall.

What happened next would forever be burned into his memory and he was grateful Pomona possessed the presence of mind to remove Locius from the scene as quickly as possible.

There wasn't just a face on the back of Quirinus' head... Something lived there. The stink of decay offended the former duellist's sensitive nose and Filius watched with a strange feeling of revolted curiosity, while the extra face disappeared as skin moved in places it shouldn't, the Defence teacher's body started to convulse, and his head snapped back into an unnatural position. For a moment, the tiny wizard thought he heard the man's cerebral vertebrae crack. The wizard's eyelids were half-way closed and as they fluttered Filius realized that all he could see was the white in the convulsing man's eyes. The Charms teacher only flinched a little when his former colleague started to scream: a high, unnatural sound that caused the half-goblin to reflexively draw a protective rune into the air.

It was one to fight off the dark spirits of the world.

Something, a dark presence Filius was unable to identify further, left the trembling body – which stilled instantly – and disappeared through the walls. Filius, wand at the ready, approached the motionless body and looked for any signs of life.

Quirinus was dead.

Simultaneously, Filius and Minerva then moved towards the still body of Mr. Potter, both dreading what they'd find.

"He's alive," Minerva sighed in relief a moment later, as she'd checked his pulse with trembling hands, all magic forgotten.

"What happened to him?" Filius asked, a bit puzzled, starting to check for curses that might have been used on the boy. Harry looked... There were bruises all over his face and more were starting to form... He had the sudden wish Quirinus was still alive, so he could have had the satisfaction of killing him.

"He distracted him, so I could finish him off," a quiet yet steady voice spoke from the entrance.

Lacius Longbottom, looking positively exhausted, stood there leaning against the wall as if he couldn't carry his own weight without help. Mr. Thomas was steadied by Mr. Finnegan ('Just how many first years have been out after curfew? And where exactly did we run past them?'), standing right behind the Boy Who Lived. Pomona looked deathly pale: as if tiniest breeze would floor her. However, she forced herself to appear strong and calm for the children's sake. Minerva was more collected and as deputy headmaster, she decided to take charge of the students.

"Come, children," she said, carefully levitating the small boy towards the exit.

Mr. Finnegan didn't move. He stared at the crumbled body of his former teacher. Filius immediately covered it by conjuring a blanket out of thin air.

He stepped forward, "Mr. Finnegan, Mr. Thomas, Mr. Longbottom... Please, let's go to the hospital wing."

"He's dead, isn't he?" the Irish boy whispered, his lips quivered.

Gently, Pomona laid a hand on his shoulder and said softly, "I'm afraid he is."

"Well, he... He wanted to harm us. He hurt Harry. He was evil, right? So I guess he..."

They were just children.

Realization hit the tiny wizard like cold water. How did you explain tonight's events to a child? Thankfully, none of the boys had actually seen Quirinus die, but they might have heard him scream.

Their parents had to be summoned immediately. Maybe even a Mind Healer from St. Mungo's. They had to...

First they had to go to the infirmary where their physical injuries would be taken care of. After that, they could attempt to take care of the damage that had been done to their young souls.

Minerva seemed to be thinking the same thing because she gently shushed them out of the room. Filius took a moment to observe the room and frowned when he saw two bricks from the wall lying on the ground.

As they walked back, Mr. Longbottom told his friends what had happened once they'd parted on the chessboard ('Where were they hidden? Why didn't they say anything?'). Apparently, he'd found Quirrell pacing across the room, looking for the stone – it stunned Filius just how much the Boy Who Lived knew – and confronted him.

Only to find out that You-Know-Who inhabited Quirinus' body.

It took all of Filius' willpower not to shudder violently at the thought that the presence they'd seen leave was You-Know-Who... A wizard and a dark spirit. If the goblin community found out about that, it would be a catastrophe.

Mr. Longbottom had faced his mortal enemy bravely, though he didn't say that in so many words. At some point and seemingly out of nowhere, Mr Potter arrived and the foolish boys started to exchange some sort of banter to enrage their far more powerful

opponent. One of Mr. Potter's remarks seemed to have been particularly vicious, causing Quirinus to lose control.

The result was evident.

Filius could hardly look at the broken boy. The swelling only worsened as they moved and though he was never in critical condition, it looked bad enough that they began to move faster. Pomona flew ahead to incapacitate Fluffy, and soon they were out of the deepest chambers Hogwarts had to offer. They reached the Infirmary in no time but halted when they heard loud voices coming from the rooms.

"... It has no residual effects. I am fine, Madam. Believe me. The children ..."

"Are taken care of. Filius, Minerva and Pomona..."

"Do not have the slightest notion what they are dealing with. Now, let me leave!"

"One more step, Severus Snape, and I will use a Bodybind on you."

Quickly, Pomona pushed open the doors, unwilling to allow this argument to continue.

One look at the unconscious boy was enough to end all discussion. It was impossible to tell who was moving faster, in fact that Severus and Poppy arrived at Mr. Potter's side simultaneously.

The mediwitch lifted her wand, but was stopped by Severus whose face didn't show the slightest sign of emotion. He carried the frail body to the bed farthest away from the door, next to one of the large windows, motioned the matron to follow them and closed the curtains behind her. The rest waited in anxious silence, wishing the curtains didn't have privacy charms on them.

As they waited for Madame Pomfrey to finish her examination, the remaining three Heads found beds for their students to remain.

"Has Albus already been notified?" Minerva whispered.

Filius simply nodded.

"Severus... What?" Poppy Pomfrey was completely flabbergasted, once the privacy wards were set. The last time Severus had been as adamant concerning a student's privacy, it turned out to be a case of...

"No," she whispered, her voice broke. "No, he's been coming here for the past two months. I'd have... He was too thin." It couldn't be. Harry simply didn't behave like a victim of abuse.

Katie Bell standing in the Hospital Wing with a scalp wound and a black eye due to a bludger, which had hit her. Harry didn't as much as blink.

"Oh Merlin..." Her hands started to shake. She didn't deserve to call herself mediwitch. Not if she neglected the children in her care this badly.

"Poppy," the serene wizard's voice was soft and the mediwitch was snapped out of the bubble of regret and guilt that started to build. Severus never called her by her first name unless he was trying to calm her down; or to gently remind her of her task.

She straightened up and cast a diagnostic spell to see what had been done to the small body over the past twenty-four hours. Once she'd sussed out the current damage, she could take care of past injuries.

It was enough.

There were several bruises all over his body, caused by what must have been a very painful fall. A severe concussion caused by several blows to the head of both magical and physical origin (someone give her two minutes with Quirinus and she would make sure this would never happen again!). His face was also severely bruised and there were a few fractures to the facial bones. Meanwhile, Severus left for a short moment and came back with several topical potions for the pain, for the bruises, and...

"I don't think he needs a Calming draft," she stated, feeling a bit confused.

"For you," was his plain answer.

Then she noticed that her hands were still shaking. What he gave her wasn't a sedative in the strictest sense: it would calm an agitated mind while it had no effect whatsoever on an already level-headed mind.

Once she took it, she had the necessary peace to think about tonight's events ... and her colleague's behaviour.

He was too calm. He was always composed, but he was only this serene when he was emotionally involved. It was almost as if...

"You knew," she said reproachfully. "You knew long before this!"

For the first time in eleven years, Severus had decided not to bring an abused child to her right away.

"Yes, I did," he admitted, his voice even.

"What happened? Why didn't you tell me?" Each syllable was accusing. Word by word she sounded more agitated.

"Calm down." He used a tone that was usually reserved for rebellious students and its effect was always immediate and it was just as effective tonight. "We will speak about this later. Right now, we have a few injured children who need immediate medical attention. Mr. Potter's past can wait a couple of hours."

This brought her back on track. She cast a few spells to take care of the concussion. Unfortunately, they caused fatigue and would prolong Harry's unconsciousness. She'd have to be on alert the entire night. She didn't want him to wake up in the Hospital Wing all alone.

Then she left Harry's side and took care of Mr. Thomas, who was suffering from a concussion as well, though a mild one. She insisted on him staying overnight, and he was too tired to protest in the slightest. Mr. Finnegan was wholly unharmed, while Mr. Longbottom seemed to have hit his head pretty hard, though he has escaped a concussion. Nevertheless, he would stay overnight as well.

Apparently, Pomona had gone to fetch his brother as well as Mr. Weasley and , while Minerva had left to notify the parents of the

injured children (or in Harry's case, his legal guardian). Filius was about to inform the rest of the staff.

No matter how well the teachers were capable of taking matters into their own hands, the mediwitch dearly hoped for the headmaster to return soon.

Once all the children who were to remain were settled and Mr. Finnegan, Neville Longbottom, Ms. Granger and Mr. Weasley were escorted to bed by Professors Taylok and Clearwater, she went back to Harry's bed. Severus was still there, sitting on a chair at a considerable distance from the bed.

He looked just about ready to sleep, obviously exhausted by the vicious assault he'd suffered. At the same time, he was caught up in deep thought. That much she could tell as she was one of the few people capable of reading him.

"You do know that it is my duty to examine him, to protocol the damage that was done to him. As it would have been your duty to report it." She couldn't just let this slide. Severus usually didn't fail in his judgment.

Silence.

The Potions Master was quiet for so long, she started to believe he wouldn't answer at all.

"He has been betrayed by every adult that ever walked into his life with the exception of his current guardian who is completely overtaxed by the sheer amount of children under her care, not to mention incapable of raising a wizard child. She gained his respect and loyalty by letting go of the past. If I had the slightest impression that he was currently suffering from abuse of any nature, I would have reported it immediately. However, that is not the case, and it would have done by far more harm than good if I had told you about it."

"Scars are not only of the body, Severus..."

Dark eyes caught hers, reminding her that he was well aware of this fact, and that she was not helping the discussion at all. "I know. Yet... What do you want to do? Send him to Mind Healer Naima?"

Let me tell you that Muggle authorities have already given him psychiatric evaluations and before you dismiss this, let me also remind you that a mind healer's non-magical tactics are very closely related to what their Muggle equivalents do. Every magical alternative would be an intrusion and he won't consent to it because he doesn't want an adult inside of his head. Friends of his have been brought to what you – a former trainee of St Mungo's – refer to as the Fourth Circle. He is ready to do anything to keep his other friends as well as himself from that place..."

"If he needs it..." she hated situations like this. This one was particularly dire. She could feel it. Severus' jaw wouldn't be as tense otherwise. As she started to speak, Severus stood up revealing his full height.

"If you force him, he's gone. He won't stay at a place where people are set to cage him. He has to be evaluated, yes, physically shortly after he regains consciousness. When he's awake. Anything else would discomfort him."

"You lost me, Severus."

"He isn't a simpleton. He will know that he must have been unconscious; he knows that would lead to a physical examination performed by you. Besides, he has been helping you, Madam, be assured he will know of your awareness the very second he looks into your eyes. Do not underestimate him." Severus was very solemn by nature. Tonight, he seemed to have reached an entirely new level.

At the same time...

Poppy smiled, "You are fond of him."

"Please excuse me, Madam Pomfrey," he said, not even bothering to respond. "I will try to get some rest before the headmaster arrives."

His limbs felt heavy, his head heavier.

It took Harry several minutes to realize where he was and remember what happened. He was confused. He couldn't connect prior

occurrences to the complete lack of discomfort. He'd expected to be in pain... and he wasn't.

Very slowly, he opened his eyes and became aware that he wasn't the only one in the room. The curtains around his bed were only half-way closed and he could see Dean, fast asleep. He heard nearly silent footsteps near his bed and was up a second later.

"Quiet," Laciuss hissed. "Don't move. Pomfrey will know you are awake otherwise."

"What happened to Quirrell?" That was the only important question.

"He's been taken care of," was Laciuss' blunt answer.

"Dead?" If Laciuss thought he was callous, his questions might as well be.

The Boy Who Lived flinched, but it didn't amuse the other kid. Harry wouldn't shed a tear over Quirrell either, however.

"He survived, though," Harry concluded. "Goblins say that what's in between cannot be killed. He called himself a shadow; in between darkness and light."

"He survived, yes," the other boy whispered.

"You saved my life... again. I owe you this time," Harry said, though he couldn't keep his vexation out of his voice.

"We're even. You don't owe me anything." The Boy Who Lived gritted his teeth. He seemed to be unable to openly admit that Harry had saved him as well.

"I told them you helped by distracting him, so I could stop him." Laciuss continued. The lie explained his reluctance to admit Harry's involvement. The lie apparently didn't bother the famous underage wizard. Yet, he seemed to feel the need to explain himself, "Let's face it, Potter. The Wizarding community generally wouldn't care much about someone who did something to keep You-Know-Who from coming back..."

"But if that someone was the Boy Who Lived it's another story entirely," Harry shrugged indifferently.

"Exactly. The world needs a hero, and that's not you." He didn't smirk when he said that, he didn't look superior. He seemed to be stating simple facts.

Harry nodded slowly. He knew what he had done and he didn't need other people's acknowledgment. There were more important matters to discuss.

"He'll be back, you know," he said.

"Not for a while, he won't," Lacijs replied coolly.

Harry still felt exhausted and that was the reason he didn't feel the vibes until it was almost too late.

"Go to bed, I think I heard something," he hissed. For once, the other boy obeyed at once. Harry closed the curtains and pretended to sleep.

Not ten seconds later, he finally heard quiet steps entering the Hospital Wing, coming from the direction of Madam Pomfrey's office. She came straight to his bed, and Harry felt his heart pounding uncomfortably fast. He was sure that she would hear it as soon as she opened the curtains.

He'd been examined.

When he was unconscious.

He had been unable to hide anything, to distract her in any way. She had to know. He felt his lips quiver slightly and tears prickled right beneath his closed eyelids. He forced himself to relax, so she would just...

"I know you are awake, Harry," she whispered almost inaudibly. "You don't want to talk and I understand. Be assured that I only checked for physical injuries inflicted on you for the past twenty-four hours. Professor Snape interfered when I was about to perform one of the routine diagnostic spells in front of everybody. So, be assured he kept your secrets and did everything in order to protect your

privacy. I'm not a fool, Harry, but I have failed you by neglecting to examine you when you first entered this Infirmary and I saw that you were far too thin. I am sorry."

For the first time in his life he'd received an apology from an adult. Harry had no idea what to do, so he just continued pretending to sleep.

"It will be your choice, Harry. You will decide when, where and with whom you will have this examination. Please, try to get some more sleep. The healing balms I used should make all your bruises disappear at sunrise." Having said that, she left his side again and Harry had the urge to call her back.

'How about never, nowhere with nobody?'

Retrospectively, he'd known it had been an illusion to think he'd be able to keep his secrets for seven years, but a little longer than two and a half months would have been desirable.

Besides, it wasn't public knowledge. Thanks to Snape's quick reasoning. Snape who seemed to have recovered from the attack he'd suffered. Snape who'd served Voldemort... A shudder ran down his spine as realization hit him again.

'And it seems you have forgotten whom you serve.'

Quirrell's words, followed by the terror in Snape's eyes.

Conflicting feelings battled each other. He was more than a little grateful for the professor's silence concerning his past. Snape had stared death in the face without flinching when he opposed the one he'd served. Yet, on the other hand...

Why?

For the love of... Why would anyone, not to mention an intelligent man like Snape follow someone like Voldemort? Serve a racist murderer, a megalomaniac determined to rule the world?

He'd never betray to anyone what he'd witnessed. Snape had kept his secrets, he'd keep his return. That was the way his world worked.

Besides, Snape no longer followed Voldemort; that much he knew. Ultimately, this was all that mattered.

Harry had no idea how long he stayed awake after that, haunted by past events.

Seeing what was hidden under the turban.

Voldemort.

Quirrell's violent attack.

Madam Pomfrey knowing what happened.

Voldemort knowing what happened. Knowing him.

At some point, he fell asleep.

When Harry woke up, he heard the headmaster's voice.

"You've done extraordinarily well, dear boy. I'm proud of you."

"Sure," was Laciús' distanced answer. "You can't tell me anything really... Why I defeated him that night when it was Lily Potter who died to save us and Father told me that altruistic sacrifices never hold as much power as the ones out of love, which would indicate that Potter would have to be the one protected. You can't tell me why You-Know-Who – and I won't say his name, no matter how much you want me to – wanted to kill us in the first place. But at least, you are proud of me. Excuse me, sir," Harry hadn't known that a single syllable could say something along the lines of, 'Suck it up and deal!' "I'd like to see how my friends and brother are. My parents will arrive in a couple of hours and take me home for a few days until the first wave of hysterical madness is over, however I'd like to talk to my friends first."

At that, Harry heard light steps walk towards the exit and leave the Infirmary. He closed his eyes, and unless his senses fooled him, only Dumbledore was present. Carefully, he stood up because he didn't quite trust the effects of medical potions, unjustly as he noticed a second later and pushed the curtains away.

The headmaster looked completely lost and sad. Harry wasn't the person to rub salt in a wound, but...

"It was your idea, wasn't it?" Dumbledore spun around, obviously startled. And judging by his expression, he wasn't startled a lot. "To protect the stone like that. I honestly don't know what to make of you. The protection looked awfully like a bunch of tests to me."

"Mr. Potter..." Harry frowned. From the day they'd met, Dumbledore had called him by his first name. Something wasn't right. Trying to sound unaffected, he continued his speech, "Whatever you want to prepare him for, sir... He's smart and he doesn't trust you. You better stop playing games, or you will be very lonely very soon. Don't ever betray those you care for."

He felt his heart beating faster, desperately hoping he hadn't read the man wrong. He was almost relieved when he saw Dumbledore looking even more miserable. The silence became uncomfortable in a matter of seconds, and Harry took a deep, thankful breath when it was interrupted by Madam Pomfrey, who told the headmaster that they needed privacy.

Harry couldn't look her in the eyes. If he had, he'd have seen that she too had troubles with that.

"Can I... Can we wait a couple of days? When things go back to normal around here?" He'd heard Laci's comment and he could only imagine what the Hogwarts' grapevine came up with. He couldn't go through all that and face his past at the same time.

"Of course. Take your time," she answered kindly.

"Are you the only one who can do those tests?" Once he realized how that sounded, he looked remorsefully into her eyes. "It's not that I... I don't want you to see me like that. I'd like to learn from you for the next seven years, how to heal, how to..."

"Conceal?" she finished, her nostrils flared indignantly.

"Believe me I don't plan on getting beaten up any time soon." The look she gave him spoke volumes. Harry snorted, "I prefer getting smacked around over being killed. I'm not in love with pain, but I'm

not suicidal either." She flinched, obviously not used to a young boy being quite this blunt.

"Sometimes you are so much like him, it scares me," she said, but she smiled fondly. Harry looked up in surprise.

"Who?"

"Oh, just a boy I knew when I went to school," she answered lightly, but her eyes looked sad. "He was a little older and came from a Muggle orphanage, like you. He died many years ago. His mind and tongue worked as fast as yours when he felt comfortable, but your views differ nine times out of ten. In this you agree fully though, it's almost as if you're quoting him."

"What was his name?" Harry asked instead of telling her that pride could only go so far. His pride nearly got him killed, but he never would have died for it.

"Tom. He went to Wool's orphanage. Merlin, he hated the place."

Harry gasped, "That one burned in the seventies and is still talked of. I'd be worried if he didn't hate the place." Also, it wasn't too far away from Hell. He'd actually walked past the building on his way to King's Cross. It had been restored in the mid-eighties, after several fruitless efforts in the seventies. Why anybody would want to restore a place like that puzzled him. Either they really didn't care about history and rumours, or their taste was disgusting.

Madam Pomfrey's voice brought him back to reality, "Who do you want to perform the examination?"

"Does it include, you know..." he gestured taking off his shirt. If that was the case, screw his education with the matron... He wouldn't let anybody actually see it. Magic had to be good for something.

"No, it's a series of spells that will tell the caster what happened to your body over the years. You won't have to undress."

"I would like Professor Snape then. If he's willing and able."

"Be assured I am both," a deep voice spoke from the Infirmary's entrance and Harry jumped, angry at himself for being so absent

minded. If he didn't get a grip soon, he'd land himself serious trouble... More trouble than he was already in.

"How do you feel, sir?" Harry asked, determined not to show just how unsettled he felt by the tall wizard's presence.

Meanwhile, Madam Pomfrey seemed to sense that she was somehow unwelcome and walked past her colleague, hissing something about 'no more than five minutes'.

Once the doors to her office closed, the Potions Master sighed, "I'm not sure whether to scold or thank you." Harry laughed. He hadn't realized how tense he was until it vanished.

"That's alright, sir, you aren't the first one at that."

"Wanting to scold you?" Snape asked, sounding puzzled, but Harry was quite sure he was joking.

"It's usually 'Harry, I will bloody well strangle you if you do that again... Thanks anyway.'" Harry answered, not really feeling like keeping that to himself. In foreseeable future, this man would know more than any other adult in his life, with the terrible exception of Voldemort, who'd seen it first-hand in Harry's mind. But his parents' murderer wasn't an adult, he wasn't even human.

Snape seemed to observe the change in Harry's mood as he unconsciously grasped the arm that revealed Voldemort's mark.

"Mr. Potter, I..."

"Remember what I told you? I won't ask, you won't tell. Clean slate, sir. I can't pretend to understand, but you've made your current position quite clear to me last night, twice actually. Neither of us wanted the other to know our darkest secret, but we do. We're even, sir. I won't tell anyone."

Slowly, the adult wizard nodded.

"We all have marks, professor," Harry added, fingering his ever-present watch. He noticed Snape's gaze witnessing the gesture. "As long as you don't let them rule your life, it's fine."

"It wasn't your choice to wind up there. It was out of your control," Snape protested without displaying too much emotion.

Harry felt like crying and bit his lips, "Actually, it was." The thought of a life without knowing Char as well as everybody else burned him, but looking back, he couldn't say for sure if he'd be able to make this very same choice twice. Nobody would blame him for those thoughts, but he was still ashamed.

The tall wizard looked as if he wanted to say something more, but Madam Pomfrey entered and their conversation was cut short. Not two minutes later, the Potions professor left after they agreed that the ominous examination would be performed after Harry's stay at the Infirmary and before Christmas break.

A few hours later, a fully awake and almost entirely recovered Harry was starting to feel stir crazy.

He was a lot of things, but a good patient wasn't one of them.

When the matron finally let his friends visit, he wasn't sure if it was out of exasperation or pity.

Theo was the first to enter, followed by Hermione, Ron and his closer mates from Hufflepuff, Hannah, Susan and Eloise who brought several 'get well' cards from the rest of his class. He was surprised to see Blaise and Millicent stand at the entrance as well. When the latter saw him in the bed, she ran past everybody and hugged him tightly enough to squeeze the air out of his lungs. Gently, Blaise held her back when he saw Harry starting to look panicked.

"Ever thought about getting backup or did you just think you had to go playing hero all by yourself?" Theo asked, sounding frustrated yet warm at the same time.

"Lacius Longbottom is the hero, I just happened to stumble onto everything."

Theo smirked a little before he looked past Harry's bed towards one of the windows and squeezed his eyes together, obviously seeing something interesting.

"You need glasses, Theo," Harry suggested, but he was ignored as the other boy quickly walked to the window and stared outside. Everybody followed him.

"What is it?" Hannah asked, trying to see whatever Theo was seeing.

"Nothing. Just looking for the Kneazles," he answered casually.

Blaise chuckled.

"Sorry, what?" Harry asked, not getting the joke. Ron started laughing too, as well as Susan who shook her head in disbelief.

She explained, "I guess what he's trying to say that before you 'stumble onto' anything and let someone else play the hero, Kneazles will fly."

The rest of the group started laughing, and Harry said, "Somehow, I think pig sounds better than Kneazle."

"Is that what Muggles say?"

Harry nodded, but he grinned too. It disappeared once he saw Theo's serious expression.

"Next time, we'll back you up." It wasn't a question. It was a promise. "You're no longer the only magically gifted person around. We can take care of ourselves."

"Oh, there was a really special form of magic involved, Theo. The kind we can't summon," Harry said softly. They all looked at him, puzzled. "Sheer, dumb, incredible luck. We'd both be dead otherwise."

Everybody flinched a little at Harry's words, but Theo looked furious. Harry cast him an apologetic glance. The young Slytherin's jaw was tense.

"Next time, you let us back you up," Theo repeated.

"I'll try."

"Now that's better."

A question formed in Harry's mind and for once he wanted everybody to hear it, "Why do you think I never accepted backup?"

"Come on, Harry," Theo was clearly irritated.

"No, I don't understand. What makes you think that?"

"You knew how to do conscious magic when you came here, you've got the Influence... You couldn't rely on your Muggle friends without risk, so you got used to doing things on your own."

To a point, that was true. Then he thought of some of the stunts Matt and Sharon pulled around Sullivan, so Jean and Harry could sneak Rose out of the 'Hole'. Or that time they'd taken on an East End Mob that was trying to branch out.

"I did rely on them, Theo, and I would do it again without hesitation. Magic doesn't give you that much of an advantage if you can't fight," he said, feeling protective of his friends.

Theo sighed, "Just... promise not to jump into the next adventure without some people watching your back."

"Adventures have the tendency to jump me, not the other way around," Harry answered, a bit defensive, but he carefully gave his word to look for help if the situation warranted it.

They talked for a long time – among other things, Hermione and Ron told him what happened after he'd lost consciousness and the others told him of the rumours floating around the castle – until Madam Pomfrey shushed them out of the room, leaving Harry all to himself again. He dreaded the night. Last night he'd been drugged out of his mind. Tonight, for the first time in Harry's life, he would be sleeping all alone in a really large room.

An hour and no sleep whatsoever later, he heard the door to the Infirmary open.

It was Theo, Blaise, Millicent, Susan, Hannah and Eloise.

Harry didn't say anything. He mutely watched them approaching his bed. Eloise seemed to be carrying a sleeping bag. The others

moved a couple of beds near his own as quietly as possible. Some noise was made, but Madam Pomfrey would likely be sleeping soundly tonight after staying up all of the previous night.

"What...?" he whispered.

"You looked unhappy when we left, so we figured we'd keep you company," Susan explained as she went to fetch a couple of cushions from the other beds.

"If anybody finds out about this..."

"Nobody will know, Harry," Blaise pacified him. "Believe me: We left after Gabriela's last control. She went to sleep, so nobody will notice until tomorrow morning."

"You are crazy," the only male Hufflepuff in the room hissed. "And I'm really grateful for that," he added in defeat, once Theo shot him a glance with raised eyebrows.

Hannah opened her sleeping bag ('Mum's idea. She wasn't quite convinced that the list was all we needed for school was all I needed.') and decided to sleep right next to Harry. Blaise and Millicent shared a bed as well as Eloise and Susan. Theo was perfectly happy sleeping by himself.

Harry, finally feeling relaxed, was touched and happy, and fell asleep before he was even able to wish them all 'Good night!'

The next morning, he was awoken by the by now familiar walls of Hogwarts and he shot up instantly.

"Peeves," he hissed, hoping that the poltergeist was nearby. Indeed, the chaos spirit was behind him a second later blowing cold air into his right ear.

"Please, whoever's coming, can you distract them for like... five minutes?" he whispered.

"It's the billowing bat of the dungeons, it is. Won't aggravate him in the mornings I won't." It looked like nobody truly wanted to mess with Slytherin's Head of House.

Snape. Oh no!

"I'm not asking to annoy him, just distract him. Please?" The others would be in real trouble if Snape found them here. "Or, can you get my friends out of here without letting him know?"

It was strange to see those mischievous eyes looking thoughtful. Then he grinned. He snapped his fingers and a couple of elf-like creatures Harry had never seen before appeared out of nowhere. Without exchanging words with the elves, Peeves, his friends, and the elf-like creatures vanished. The beds rearranged themselves instantly and the second Snape entered the Infirmary, everything looked normal.

"Good morning, Professor," Harry said cheerfully, trying to cover up his confusion.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter. I assume you've slept soundly," he noted.

"Yes, sir, thank you. How have you been recovering?"

"Very well," he answered politely. "Mr. Potter, have you seen Ms. Bulstrode, Mr. Zabini and Mr. Nott?"

"Yesterday, when they visited me," he responded without blinking. He was still a bit tense whenever Snape was closer than five feet from him, but he had to admit that he wasn't as much on edge anymore.

"Hmm," was the pensive response, "I see." They both were aware that Snape knew where they'd been and Harry couldn't help but be curious how Snape would handle the whole thing. "My prefects were quite distraught this morning when they noticed their absence."

"Sir, I'm sure Mill, Blaise and Theo wouldn't want to upset your prefects," Harry defended them. "Not without good reason, at least."

"I agree," was the carefully chosen reply. Harry briefly wondered just how much Snape knew and how much of it was guess-work.

"Sir, hypothetically, if they decided to come here in order to keep me company, what would be the consequences?"

"Hypothetically speaking, I would have them serve detention until the end of the year for ignoring school as well as house rules," the Potions Master answered seriously, but Harry could swear that for the shortest of moments there was a glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

"However, if there wasn't a trace of them, hypothetically, what would you do?"

"I generally do not punish the members of my house without proof, Mr. Potter, hypothetically speaking or not," Snape replied.

"That's good to know, sir," Harry smiled.

Neither of them spoke until Snape continued their little game.

"Hypothetically speaking, Mr. Potter, how would you explain the disappearance of three or rather, given Professor Sprout's report, six first-year students from a room that disables almost any kind of magical transportation past a member of the staff?"

"If I had a hypothetical clue, sir, I would hypothetically share my hypothesis," Harry laughed light-heartedly.

"I'm afraid your first use of the word isn't entirely correct, Mr Potter." It was impressive just how tightly the tall man was in control of his emotions.

"Sir, I'm sure that, when you return you will find that Blaise, Mill and Theo will be either in the Great Hall or their Common Room, and they will be wondering what this mayhem is about."

"I'm inclined to agree, though I still can't figure out what happened."

"Me neither," Harry answered truthfully. Peeves was full of surprises, and as chaos spirit he lived to cause mayhem. And causing mayhem in this school's most collected mind was definitely worth the favour he'd done for Harry.

Snape left shortly thereafter, but a stream of visitors came by, starting with Professor Flitwick and ending with sgrafur Taylok who inquired after his health. Harry was surprised to note just how concerned the Charms professor was, and Harry thanked him

wholeheartedly for saving their lives. Professor McGonagall joined them and Harry had to repeat his speech on just how grateful he was. She too seemed to be a bit shaken up over the beating Harry had taken, and judging by the murderous expression she assumed when talking of Quirrell, the eleven-year-old considered his former Defence teacher lucky for being dead already. Professor Sprout was behaving a bit strangely: she kept glancing at him as if waiting for him to do something unexpected. That was understandable; she probably wasn't used to students who kept getting themselves into trouble. On the other hand, it made him feel uneasy.

A/N: Before anybody says "Flitwick was the one who created the flying keys and McGonagall was the one who created the chessboard!" I am fully aware that Harry, Ron and Hermione interpreted it that way in canon. But if you look at it, the keys looked as if they were transformed and the chessboard looked "Engorgio"ed... Besides, who seems to be more into Quidditch: Professor Flitwick or Professor McGonagall :) ?

As always: Thank you so much for the reviews and I apologize for not replying... or rather for replying so rarely. Between writing and real life, I didn't have much time. I hope to do better in the future.

I intend to write on this story until the children's first christmas break starts, then I'd like to spend some time taking care of my story notes (which are kind of a mess right now; on scraps of paper and my original notes, at the bottom of the file, which entails the whole story), so I don't start to forget or mix up anything... Also, I'll probably go back to Finding Parental Care for a while. That story has been waiting long enough to be continued...

Remember, lots of reviews lead to lots of motivation to continue both stories ;)

Last, but not least: 0TruestBlue0 and DaiVath, thank you so much for beta-ing this chapter, although the both of you were occupied with more important things. I truly appreciate it *cyber hug*.

Next Chapter: Unexpected Visitors

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